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Productive Wars and Culturally Sensitive Occupations

The New “U. S. Army / Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Manual”

Wendy Brown

Author’s Note: This essay was originally commissioned by the editor of *Perspectives in Political Science*, the American Political Science Association book review journal, as part of a symposium on the *U. S. Army / Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Manual*. The *Manual* itself was released as a government document in 2006 and published as a trade paperback by Chicago University Press in 2007. Importantly, the *Manual* does more than update military strategy and tactics for success in 21st century armed conflicts. Rather, it outlines a new and comprehensive approach to combating forces opposing United States efforts to secure or overturn certain regimes. It thus represents the new military doctrine for the US policy of “regime change” in various parts of the world, even as it also draws on knowledge and examples pertaining to older conflicts, for example Vietnam, as well as those the US was not directly involved in, for example Northern Ireland.

While military field manuals – guidelines for military strategy and conduct in war – are not the kind of work ordinarily reviewed in academic venues, the book review editor of *Perspectives* regarded the new *Manual* as an important text for scholars of politics to analyze and discuss. Presumably this assessment rested on a number of factors including: 1) the extensive reliance on social scientific knowledge in the *Manual*, 2) the cross-over publication of the *Manual* as a trade text and its wide consumption by politicians and the lay public, 3) the governing project of the *Manual*, which is a politically, economically and culturally integrated project of nation- and state-building, and hence, 4) the foreign policy implications of this new strategy for military-political domination by the world’s most powerful nation state. It is the combination of these elements that made it, if not a work of social science scholarship, still more than a military handbook or narrow policy document. What follows is a brief reflection on the *Manual* as a prism through which some of the tensions in American empire can be read.

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“We are winning militarily but losing politically” is the going word from those who continue to think there might be brightness in the future of the U. S. occupation of Iraq.¹ However, according to the 2007 *U. S. Army / Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, this is not a possibility. Where “the political and military aspects [...] are so bound together as to be inseparable”, against insurgents – whether Al Qaeda, Mao’s Red Army, the Taliban, the IRA, or Hamas – to lose politically is to lose. (40) War of this sort is not politics by other means, as Clausewitz had it, nor is there aptness to Foucault’s infamous reversal of Clausewitz’s maxim.² Rather, both insurgency and counterinsurgency (COIN) involve extensively researched and coordinated orchestration and exploitation of military, police, economic, cultural, political and religious powers.

Substantially expanding the principle applied too late in the Vietnam debacle, that of “winning the hearts and minds of the people”, and making it a central rather than a supplemental concern, the *Manual* argues that triumph in a particular nation over today’s insurgents requires nothing less than a combination of artful governance amidst violence and instability, provision of social welfare for the whole population (including meeting basic needs for food, water, shelter, clothing and medical treatment), the securing of civilian safety (from both insurgent and counter-insurgent violence), the establishment and maintenance of the rule of law and protocols for addressing grievances, and the building of political legitimacy for the regime being defended or installed. In short, it requires – from the U. S. military no less – a degree of political intelligence and foresight worthy of Rousseau’s lawgiver, a degree of provision for human needs worthy of the farthest reach of the communist imaginary, a degree of stabilization through governance worthy of Hobbes or perhaps Kant, an ability to “decipher cultural narratives” (the *Manual*’s words) worthy of a trained ethnographer, and an ability to manipulate these narratives worthy of Plato. It also entails the paradox of fostering the strength and legitimacy of what are often puppet regimes, and doing so while the occupiers are still on site. And all of this in a milieu of upheaval, violence and complexly riven societies with weak or non-existent states.

Indeed, what is most striking about the *Manual* is not its informational content or recommendations – these are surprising only if one expects to find old fashioned techniques for victory on the basis of superior military technology, strategy and force – but its relentless confounding of conventional boundaries between military, political, economic, and anthropological spheres of activity on the one hand, and its upending of conventional military structure and protocol on the other.³ Consider, to start with, the intriguing phenomenon of war doctrine produced jointly by Ivy League and military experts, and specifically through a collaboration between the Carr Center for Human Rights at Harvard and the

US Army.⁴ The text was produced (one can't quite say "written", since there is so much material lifted from unattributed sources) by teams consisting of scholars – mainly anthropologists and sociologists rather than political scientists, and no game theorists or formal modelers – and military personnel with heavily featured academic degrees. The strangeness of a military manual that draws extensively on liberal arts scholarship is compounded by its republication with the imprimatur of a prestigious university press, a phenomenon especially noteworthy in light of the shabby scholarly practices.⁵ Is there significance in the fact that the University of Chicago and its Press are home to Straussians instrumental in promulgating a foreign policy of regime change in the Middle East? Or in the enormous boost the book has evidently given to the Press's coffers? (The *Manual* was on Amazon's top 100 for several months in fall 2007 and remains a very strong seller.) Of course, the back cover informs readers that the Press "will donate a portion of the proceeds from this book to the Fisher House Foundation, a private-public partnership that supports the families of America's injured servicemen". That is, in keeping with capital's latest ploy to garnish sales of everything from tee shirts to air travel by promising to donate an undesignated and potentially minuscule amount of proceeds to charity, thus blurring the lines between profitable and non-profit enterprises (producing profitability from the non-profit world and corrupting non-profits with corporate interests), the Press will bestow part of what it makes off the military to a project which mixes public and private funds as well as labor, and compensates for inadequate public funding for military families suffering losses from a war itself increasingly outsourced and draining public coffers while filling private ones. If you had trouble following the fusions and flows in that last sentence, it is neither the writer's fault nor your own but consequent to the historically unparalleled lines of transit and boundary breakdowns between spheres formerly distinct from one another.

The publication story offers only a foretaste of the boundary crossings, substitutions of functions, and interlocking spheres featured within and contextualizing the *Counterinsurgency Manual*. If the *Manual* can be reduced to a single didactic point, it is that successful wars against insurgents involve erudite and careful mobilization of every element of the society in which they are being waged. These wars will be won through a new and total kind of governance, one that emanates from the military but reaches to security and stability for civilian life, formal and informal economies, structures of authority, patron-client relationships, political participation, culture, law, identity, social structure, material needs, ethnic and linguistic subdivisions, and more. (81–99) So the COIN military must not only coordinate closely with other agents of regime change, including in the host nation, but must itself apprehend and manipulate

every aspect of a society if it is to bend the society to its cause rather than to the insurgent one.

The difficulties of these requirements for the military cannot be understated. First, even as it recruits heavily from the uneducated strata of the United States population and is notoriously allergic to complex academic knowledge and cultural cosmopolitanism, the military engaged in counter-insurgency must become an intellectually astute and sensitive operation highly attuned to the complexities of governance, political economy, religious belief, cultural practices, and local *mores*. More than merely borrowing knowledge from the academy, the military has to supplant an emphasis on technological and tactical supremacy, manly strength and fortitude, and xenophobic patriotism with an emphasis on intellectual reflexivity, cultural sensitivity, and cosmopolitan appreciation of cultural difference. In short, it has to remake its culture and approach to war through the terms of the effeminate political liberalism against which its own identity has traditionally been crafted. Second, the COIN military must largely shed its hierarchical and bureaucratic protocols to glean and operationalize the knowledge it needs. Commands emanating from distant Beltway generals and carried out by obedient grunts are irrelevant if not damaging to successful counter-insurgency – “effective COIN operations are decentralized, and higher commanders owe it to their subordinates to push as many capabilities as possible down to their level.” (47) Or, consider this from the *Manual’s* Introduction: “Forces that learn COIN effectively have generally developed COIN doctrine and practices locally; regularly challenged their [own] assumptions, both formally and informally; learned about the broader world outside the military and requested outside assistance in understanding foreign political, cultural, social and other situations beyond their experience; promoted suggestions from the field; fostered open communications between senior officers and their subordinates; coordinated closely with governmental and nongovernmental partners at all command levels; [and] proved open to soliciting and evaluating advice from the local people in the conflict zone. These are not always easy practices for an organization to establish, adopting them is particularly challenging for a military engaged in a conflict. However [...] learning organizations defeat insurgencies; bureaucratic hierarchies do not.” (iii)

So the COIN military is not only to become a comprehensive and finely tuned instrument of governance amidst infelicitous conditions of statelessness and violence, but to do so by replacing its hierarchical command and control structure with unprecedented boundary porousness inside and out – developing and affirming circulating flows between military and non-military, research and policy, commanding officer and subordinate. At the same time, the military must reckon with the paradox (as the *Manual* itself identifies it) that “political

factors are primary” (39–40) and that what secures these factors is not only a deep appreciation of principles of varieties of government, power, and legitimacy but a “thorough understanding of the society and culture in which COIN operations are taking place” – a quick read of *The Arab Mind* will no longer suffice. (40) Indeed, each of the nine “paradoxes of counter insurgency” identified in the *Manual* pertains to valorizing the mobilization of knowledge, governance, and culture over force, for example, “some of the best weapons do not shoot”, “tactical success guarantees nothing” and “sometimes doing nothing is the best reaction”.⁶ (47–51)

But the boundary breakdowns and erasure of settled jurisdictions articulated and advocated throughout the volume are also at the heart of a set of contemporary problems for counter-insurgency that the *Manual* cannot address nor solve. What happens when the military is no longer in charge of the wars it wages because the wars themselves are outsourced to private contractors and when an occupier is no longer in charge of its occupation because the resources and enterprises of the occupied country have been sold off to the highest bidders in the world market? These are the problems signified today by proper nouns like Blackwater, Halliburton, Abu-Ghraib, and J. Paul Bremer. While the new manual clearly represents a serious effort at securing American hegemony through stabilizing and transforming rather than simply sacking the regions targeted as critical to this hegemony, insurgents are often the least of the forces exceeding the military’s control. At this writing, there are over 180,000 private security employees in Iraq, substantially more than the total number of US troops even after the spring 2007 surge. The deadly Blackwater shooting spree of September 2007 revealed not only the extent to which these private security forces are beyond the pale of American military command but beyond the pale of law, any law. As non-military personnel, they are not subject to the US Uniform Code of Military Justice and, if fired, could not be court marshaled in any event. Operating as combatants outside the boundaries of the United States, they are not subject to American Constitutional law. International law would be awkwardly and ineffectively summoned in a context in which international justice instruments have been spurned from the outset. And Blackwater also operates outside Iraqi law: Order 17 of the Coalition Provisional Authority, issued by Paul Bremmer the day before the CPA ceded to a formally sovereign Iraqi government but unimpeachable by that supposedly sovereign body, states that “contractors shall not be subject to Iraqi laws or regulations in matters relating to the terms and conditions of their Contracts”. The Bremmer orders, which also included the privatization of all public enterprises, full ownership rights and repatriation of profits by foreign firms of Iraqi businesses, opening Iraqi banks to foreign ownership and control, and the elimination of most labor protections, were designed to facilitate a radically

neoliberal legal, political and economic order in Iraq. This is a neoliberalism so relentless in its subordination of local legal and political power to the appetites of world capital that it undermines the very capacity of the US to control or master the Iraqi occupation.

So the *Manual* represents something of a tragic irony, in which the American military has grasped the importance of conducting counter-insurgency on all fronts and with a transformed military culture at the very moment that it is neither capable of controlling most of these other fronts nor in charge of outsourced military operations. The deliberate facilitation of capital's superordination in the new Iraq radically undermines the possibility of coordinating and controlling the elements of counterinsurgency identified as critical in the *Manual*. Similarly, even as the *Manual* repeatedly stresses the importance of unity of effort in counter-insurgency struggles (Chapter Two is wholly concerned with this), such unity is rendered impossible by the ubiquitousness of privatized security forces, privatized resources, privatized infrastructure building and rebuilding, privatized industry, privatized prisons and water supplies.⁷ How is unified and coordinated effort to be expected among agents produced and governed by a neoliberal rationality whose ruling principle is lack of regulation, restriction or control by anything outside the private enterprise? And what motivation could there be for investors and contractors involved in these operations to organize their efforts around any end other than profitability, an end that might well collide with "successful" counter-insurgency? It is hard to know why the private enterprises lured to Iraq specifically to sustain an occupation would aim to conclude that occupation. It is even harder to know why any of the foreign capital that flooded post-Saddam Iraq would become invested in national sovereignty and substantive democracy there. If the COIN *Manual* updates the military's approach to counterinsurgency, it remains premised on a severely outmoded figure of sovereign power, one in which American powers within the theater of war are imagined to be under the direction of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Notes

- 1 Thanks to Michael MacDonald for his critical reading of a first draft of this essay. The claim about winning militarily and losing politically emerged as early as 2004 (see, for example, Thomas E. Ricks, "Dissension Grows in Senior Ranks on War Strategy: U. S. May Be Winning Battles in Iraq But Losing the War, Some Officers Say" *Washingtonpost.com*, May 9, 2004, page A01) and has continued through Max Boot's widely cited Wall Street Journal editorial on President Bush's August 22, 2007 "losing Vietnam" speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars (Max Boot, "Another Vietnam? President Bush's Analogy to Iraq is not Inaccurate, Just Incomplete" *WSJ.com*, August 24, 2007). A different variation on the theme is offered in Ali A. Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace*, New Haven 2007.

- 2 Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures", *Power/Knowledge*. Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977 (ed. Colin Gordon), New York 1980, 90–92.
- 3 The appellation, field manual, is notably odd for a treatise concerned with a battle lacking spatial or temporal boundaries and which is precisely not about "going by the book".
- 4 There has been much rumbling on the internet and in the print news (see, for example, Patricia Cohen, "Scholars and the Military Share a Foxhole, Uneasily" *The New York Times*, 22 December 2007) about the tawdriness of scholarly research mobilized for military purposes, and also about the moral unseemliness of an academic human rights center collaborating on a war manual. But the moralizing eclipses what is most important to understand about the phenomenon – why the military needs this particular academic knowledge, how human rights operates in an imperial frame today, why anthropologists are being "embedded" in the field in significant numbers, and what the implications are of the blurred borders between military, academy, and capital. Not only has Sarah Sewell, head of the Carr Human Rights Center at Harvard, formerly worked at the Pentagon, Sewell herself points out that one of the major concerns of the *Manual* is with protecting civilians, a preeminent human rights concern during war time. If human rights activists regard reducing civilian casualties and protecting human life as an end in itself, while the generals see it as strategic in winning the civilian population over to their side, within the strictly instrumental calculations of a neo-liberal rationality, the different motivations are largely irrelevant to the convergent aims. This is especially so given the importance of being non-partisan and even apolitical to most human rights projects – it makes the task of protecting human life amidst war perfectly consistent, and leaves aside the question of a war's purposes or of who is responsible for instigating it. A strictly moral and decontextualized commitment to reducing violence and preserving human life makes any collaboration a possibility. That said, the *Manual's* joint authorship gives new meaning to then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's 2002 declaration, "the war on terrorism is a war for human rights".
- 5 According to anthropologist David Price, who closely examined one chapter of the *Manual's* unmarked and unacknowledged cribbing from scholarly sources (and discovered that they range from Max Weber and Anthony Giddens to Victor Turner), the plagiarism was brushed off by University of Chicago Press editor in chief John Tryneski. What the Press took on board, Price reports Tryneski as saying, was not a work of scholarship but, rather, a key "historic document". "Pilfered Scholarship Devastates General Petraeus' Counterinsurgency Field Manual", *CounterPunch* 16/18 (2007), 1–6.
- 6 Many of the paradoxes sound like variations on chapter titles from Machiavelli's *Prince* and herald the same fusion of war and governance. Nor, upon consideration, is this surprising: Machiavelli's focus in that little book, it will be remembered, was on what he called the "new principality" – a populated territory initially taken by force but enduringly secured through discerning engagement with the history and possibilities of the new acquisition.
- 7 Only three very short paragraphs of this nearly 400-page text are devoted to the subject of private contractors and multinational corporations. These paragraphs are largely descriptive, and the only prescription the *Manual* can offer is this (65): "When contractors or other businesses are being paid to support U. S. military or other government agencies, the principle of unity of command should apply."