

The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War¹

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“War upon rebellion was messy and slow, like eating soup with a knife.”²

I. Introduction

The insurgents Fred Kaplan writes about were not America’s enemies. They were not Sunni or Shiite or Pashtun; they were not Baathists or the Taliban. The insurgents in this case were a new breed of leaders and thinkers in the U.S. Army. They were a group of self-styled Soldier-scholars,³ originally “The Sosh Mafia”⁴ and later “COINdinistas,”⁵ who sought to change the way America fights wars by advancing counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy. In *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War*, Fred Kaplan weaves a historical account of the “messy and slow”⁶ development of COIN strategy from the halls of West Point to the highest reaches of the Defense Department and government. Although the book is more about the journey (the people involved in and the development of COIN strategy) and less about the destination (using COIN in a modern armed conflict), Kaplan draws out lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan to show the limits of COIN.

Kaplan argues, “In the end, [the insurgents] didn’t, they couldn’t, change—at least in the way they wanted to change—the American way of war.”⁷ His final analysis of the plot’s outcome is undoubtedly correct.⁸ Through a

“messy and slow”⁹ process, the insurgents brought COIN to the forefront of Army strategy and used it with some success in Iraq.¹⁰ They were, however, ultimately unsuccessful in installing COIN as America’s new strategy for all wars due to its inherent limits¹¹ and failure to turn the tide in Afghanistan.¹²

Through tracing COIN’s development and its use in Iraq and Afghanistan, Kaplan presents a timely study on how America plans and fights its wars. *The Insurgents* contains weaknesses, but as the current wars wind down and the Army plans for the inevitable next war, it is a useful resource for Army leaders, including judge advocates,¹³ on the limits of strategy and the need for the Army to change as the enemy changes.

II. Background

Fred Kaplan is a former Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter for the *Boston Globe*.¹⁴ He writes the War Stories column for *Slate Magazine* and is a frequent contributor to the *New York Times*. He is the author of three books on military and

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¹ FRED KAPLAN, *THE INSURGENTS: DAVID PETRAEUS AND THE PLOT TO CHANGE THE AMERICAN WAY OF WAR* (2013).

² T.E. LAWRENCE, *SEVEN PILLARS OF WISDOM* 193 (1935).

³ KAPLAN, *supra* note 1, at 10.

⁴ *Id.* at 5. “Sosh” refers to the West Point Social Sciences Department where many of the “insurgents” studied and taught.

⁵ *Id.* at 3. COINdinistas is a wordplay that combines the abbreviation for COIN with the name of the leftist insurgency that seized power in Nicaragua in the late 1970s (Sandinistas).

⁶ LAWRENCE, *supra* note 2. “Messy and slow” became a subtext throughout Kaplan’s book. Just as T.E. Lawrence described the Arab revolt against the Ottomans from 1916 to 1918, Kaplan described COIN’s development as messy and slow.

⁷ KAPLAN, *supra* note 1, at 365.

⁸ See discussion *infra* Part VI. Even here in his final analysis Kaplan hedges and shows the weakness of his argument. Kaplan finds that the insurgents did not change the way America fights wars, “at least in the way they intended” This shows that he believes the insurgents did change the way America fights its wars and made the Army more of a “thinking organization.”

⁹ LAWRENCE, *supra* note 2.

¹⁰ KAPLAN, *supra* note 1, at 268–69. Kaplan cites other factors that led to success in Iraq, including the Anbar Awakening, but credits COIN strategy with harnessing those factors.

¹¹ *Id.* at 364. The ideal counterinsurgency campaign, according to Petraeus protégé John Nagl, is one fought “on a peninsula against a visibly obvious ethnic minority before CNN was invented.” In other words, the perfect COIN campaign does not exist and it can only be successful in certain places—like Iraq—where circumstances converge to help it succeed.

¹² *Id.* at 348.

¹³ *Id.* at 262. Judge advocates (“command’s lawyers”) are mentioned here with regard to approving the use of the Commander’s Emergency Response Program (CERP) money for uses other than humanitarian projects, such as paying the Sons of Iraq (an organization that arose to oppose foreign fighters in that country) for “site security” during the Surge. Kaplan reports the lawyers “squirmed but concluded that it would probably be all right.” *Id.* Despite just this short mention, judge advocates can draw leadership and practical lessons on changing the Army’s way of thinking from this book.

¹⁴ Fred Kaplan—Biography, <http://www.fredkaplan.info/bio.htm> (last visited June 9, 2014) [hereinafter *Kaplan Biography*]. Kaplan was lead member of a team of *Boston Globe* reporters who won the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for a special *Boston Globe Magazine* article, “War and Peace in the Nuclear Age,” on the U.S.-Soviet nuclear arms race. *The Insurgents* was a finalist for the 2014 Pulitzer Prize for General Non-Fiction.

national security,¹⁵ holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from MIT, and is well-respected in the national security arena.¹⁶ The *New York Times* calls him “the rare combination of defense intellectual and pugnacious reporter.”¹⁷ Kaplan interviewed “more than one hundred [military and academia] players” from the COIN movement for *The Insurgents*.¹⁸ He turned those interviews into a critical analysis of the development of COIN strategy, how the Army and Department of Defense establishment fought it, and how Afghanistan ultimately revealed its limits.

III. The Insurgents

The heroes of *The Insurgents* are General David Petraeus and other COINdinistas, including General Ray Odierno (a convert to COIN),¹⁹ Colonel H.R. McMaster (who led a successful COIN campaign in Tal Afar, Iraq),²⁰ Colonel Sean MacFarland (a former Sosh cadet²¹ who was “the Awakening’s chief strategist” in Anbar Province, Iraq, in 2007),²² and Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl (part of the Sosh Mafia and author of *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*),²³

¹⁵ In addition to *The Insurgents* (2013), Kaplan authored *Wizards of Armageddon* (1983), an inside history of nuclear strategy, and *Daydream Believers* (2008), about American foreign policy in the early 21st century.

¹⁶ Kaplan Biography, *supra* note 14.

¹⁷ Thanassis Cambanis, *How We Fight: Fred Kaplan’s “Insurgents,” on David Petraeus*, N.Y. TIMES SUNDAY BOOK REV., (Jan. 24, 2013), <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/27/books/review/fred-kaplans-insurgents-on-david-petraeus.html?pagewanted=all>.

¹⁸ KAPLAN, *supra* note 1, at 397. Kaplan interviewed over 100 present and former military leaders, civilian scholars, and high-ranking civilian officials for the book. Prominent interviewees include General John Abizaid, General George Casey, Jr., General Peter Chiarelli, General Martin Dempsey, Lieutenant General (Retired) Karl Eikenberry, Robert M. Gates, Pete Geren, David Kilcullen, Major General Sean MacFarland, General Stanley McChrystal, Major General H.R. McMaster, Admiral Mike Mullen, John Nagl, General Raymond Odierno, Meghan O’Sullivan, General David Petraeus, General Peter Schoomaker, Sarah Sewell, Emma Sky, and General William Scott Wallace.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 239–41. *Id.* at 212, picture 16 and accompanying text. Kaplan explains that while Commander of the 4th Infantry Division in Tikrit, Iraq, in 2003–2004, General Odierno conducted operations in direct contradiction to COIN strategy. *Id.* at 228. Later, while working as the assistant to the Joint Chiefs of Staff as the military’s liaison to the Secretary of State, General Odierno realized that his tactics in Tikrit had been “too aggressive.” *Id.* at 194. When General Odierno became Deputy Commander in Iraq under General Petraeus, he helped implement a new strategy for the Surge based on counterinsurgency principles. *Id.* at 251.

²⁰ *Id.* at 245–46, 212 (picture 14 and accompanying text).

²¹ *Id.* at 5.

²² *Id.* at 244–48, 212 (picture 18 and accompanying text).

²³ JOHN NAGL, *LEARNING TO EAT SOUP WITH A KNIFE: COUNTERINSURGENCY LESSONS FROM MALAYA AND VIETNAM* (2002). The book, published in 2002, was widely read and distributed among military and civilian leaders who were working on solving the insurgency issues in Iraq and Afghanistan. KAPLAN, *supra* note 1, at 94, 238, 320.

among others.²⁴ Kaplan presents them, especially Petraeus, as heroes with tragic flaws.²⁵ In Kaplan’s view (ultimately proven true in Afghanistan), COIN was a strategy that works in specific circumstances and areas where the local government and U.S. interests are aligned.²⁶ The insurgents’ fatal flaw is that they saw COIN—at least in the beginning²⁷—as a set of universal principles to be applied to just about any war the Army might fight.²⁸ Kaplan proves that this is not the case.

IV. COIN Development

Much of the book is dedicated to the development of COIN strategy.²⁹ Kaplan makes a strategic decision to spend more time delving into the process of moving the Army away from the conventional war strategy to COIN, and less time on the already crowded field of recounting Iraq and Afghanistan outcomes. Kaplan’s strategy makes sense. Many readers will know what happened in Iraq and Afghanistan, but will not know the process that convinced the Army that COIN strategy would bring success in those theaters. Kaplan’s review of COIN development provides the reader—especially a military reader—insight into how the Army changes, how difficult change is, and the limits of change. It also gives insight into a new set of leaders in the Army, “a military-intellectual complex composed of think-

²⁴ KAPLAN, *supra* note 1, at 212. The number of people referred to in the book makes it difficult to keep them all straight. See discussion *infra* Part VI.

²⁵ *Id.* at 367. “Tragic flaw” means a flaw in character that brings about the downfall of the hero of a tragedy. According to Kaplan, General Petraeus’s flaw is that he tried to adopt the same COIN techniques in Afghanistan that had worked in Iraq, despite Afghanistan being a much different country with much different human and political terrain. Kaplan does not reference the scandal that brought General Petraeus down as his tragic flaw, but does address it in the postscript.

²⁶ *Id.* at 267–69. Kaplan believes the strategy only worked in “certain parts” of Iraq where U.S. interests and the local government interests aligned. It did not work in Afghanistan because U.S. and Afghan interests were often at odds. *Id.* at 347.

²⁷ *Id.* at 364. Kaplan points out that one of the main adherents to COIN, David Kilcullen, “concluded it was ‘folly’ to embark on a counterinsurgency campaign [in Afghanistan] in the first place.” Kilcullen is a former Australian Army officer with an expertise in counterinsurgency. During the height of the Iraq war, he was hired by the Department of Defense to work on the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), “a congressionally mandated report that outlines the nation’s strategy and links it to the Defense Departments’ budget and programs.” *Id.* at 89. Kilcullen went on to serve as a senior COIN advisor to General Petraeus in 2007 and 2008, and as a special advisor on COIN to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. He has written three books on counterinsurgency: *The Accidental Guerilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (2009), *Counterinsurgency* (2010), and *Out of the Mountains: The Coming of Age of the Urban Guerilla* (2013).

²⁸ *Id.* at 363.

²⁹ The first fifteen chapters are dedicated to COIN development. The last seven chapters focus on what happened in Iraq and Afghanistan.

tank researchers, policy theorists, academics, Pentagon bureaucrats, [and] officers with PhDs . . . ,” who “greatly influenced America’s military strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan.”³⁰ These “Soldier-scholars,”³¹ as Kaplan describes them, are the leaders who developed COIN into the Army’s strategy of the future, used it with some success in Iraq and Afghanistan, and trained those who will be the leaders in the next war.

V. COIN Success and Failure

Kaplan argues that COIN was a success in some parts of Iraq³² because it was given the time, troops, and treasure needed to be a success.³³ On 10 February 2007, General Petraeus assumed command of U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq.³⁴ He received 30,000 more troops to carry out his COIN strategy, otherwise known as “the Surge;” the time to carry out the strategy; and the support of President Bush and the country.³⁵

The Surge was a success due to a number of factors, not all having to do with General Petraeus’s COIN strategy. Kaplan does give credit to the Surge and COIN strategy for facilitating many of the changes that happened in Iraq during 2007, including the Anbar Awakening.³⁶

The success of COIN strategy in Iraq gave the insurgents cachet among the leaders in Washington and provided an opportunity to prove that COIN was truly the Army’s war strategy of the future. The ultimate undoing of COIN as a grand strategy was Afghanistan, where the facts, political terrain, and timetable were not conducive to it.

³⁰ Tony Perry, *Fred Kaplan’s ‘The Insurgents’ Takes on Petraeus and Policy*, L.A. TIMES (Jan. 18, 2013), <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/jan/18/entertainment/la-ca-jc-fred-kaplan-20130120>.

³¹ KAPLAN, *supra* note 1, at 10.

³² *Id.* at 267–69.

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ *Id.* at 259.

³⁵ *Id.* at 267–69.

³⁶ *Id.* at 268. Kaplan calls one of the “insurgents,” then-Colonel (COL) Sean MacFarland, “the chief strategist of the Anbar Awakening” of 2007 *Id.* at 244. The Anbar Awakening began in Ramadi, the capital of Anbar Province, where before the Awakening, “Sunni insurgents ran free and al Qaeda gunmen enjoyed unchecked control.” *Id.* at 245. Colonel MacFarland commanded a brigade with three Army battalions, a Marine regiment, and several Navy SEAL teams. *Id.* He used counterinsurgency strategy to clear al Qaeda’s strongholds, hold neighborhood outposts throughout the city, and rebuild the police force and other governing structures in Ramadi. *Id.* at 248. Ramadi became a model for COIN in Iraq and later became known as the Anbar Awakening. *Id.* MacFarland is now a Major General.

Kaplan persuasively argues that COIN is a strategy for a specific set of circumstances, like mountain warfare or jungle warfare. “COIN—the field manual and the long history of ideas it embodied—was like a set of instructions on how to drill an oil well: it didn’t guarantee that there was oil in the ground or that drilling for oil was the wisest energy policy.”³⁷ The strategy that brought such miraculous results in Iraq was just not right for Afghanistan, largely because the insurgents, particularly General Petraeus, failed to recognize that the enemy and political situation in Afghanistan were vastly different from Iraq.³⁸ Kaplan argues Petraeus and other military leaders failed to change with the enemy, and thought (wrongly, it turns out) that they could duplicate the miraculous results in Iraq despite long odds and much different human and political terrain.³⁹ In the end, Kaplan “faults [Petraeus] for not warning President Obama that he was not providing enough time or troops for a similar effort to be successful in Afghanistan.”⁴⁰ Afghanistan was the final straw for COIN as Army policy.⁴¹

VI. Counterinsurgents (Opposing Views)

Reviews of the *The Insurgents* have been generally positive,⁴² but Kaplan does have critics and his arguments in *The Insurgents* have notable weaknesses. Colonel Gian Gentile, who commanded an Army battalion in Baghdad in 2006 and holds a Ph.D. in history from Stanford University, reviewed *The Insurgents* in the *New York Journal of*

³⁷ *Id.* at 363. The field manual Kaplan refers to is FM 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, originally published in 2006.

³⁸ *Id.* at 345. The enemy in Afghanistan was different from the enemy in Iraq, in part because it had learned lessons from the Iraq insurgency. See ROB JOHNSON, *THE AFGHAN WAY OF WAR* 249–306 (2012) (describing the fighters who made up the Afghan insurgency after 2001, including Taliban, al Qaeda militants, and Arab and Iraqi mujahideen who brought with them “the latest IED technology and suicide-bomber tactics they had learned in the Iraqi resistance during combat with U.S. forces”).

³⁹ KAPLAN, *supra* note 1, at 347. Kaplan argues that General Petraeus’s frustrations in Afghanistan were not just with a changed enemy, but “stemmed . . . from the nature of Afghanistan itself: its primitive economy (which impeded the rise of an educated, entrepreneurial class); its vastly scattered, rural population (which a weak central government could rule only through a corrupt patronage network); and its long border with a state whose leaders were assisting the insurgency (which limited the success of any fight confined to Afghan territory).”

⁴⁰ Perry, *supra* note 30.

⁴¹ KAPLAN, *supra* note 1, at 357. President Obama spoke at the Pentagon on 5 January 2012 and said, “As we look beyond the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—and the end of long-term nation building with large military footprints—we’ll be able to ensure our security with smaller conventional forces.” According to Kaplan, this was the point where COIN was no longer a “core mission” of the American military. *Id.* at 358.

⁴² Cambanis, *supra* note 17; Greg Jaffe, Book Review, ‘*The Insurgents*’ by Fred Kaplan and ‘*My Share of the Task*,’ by Stanley A. McChrystal, WASH. POST (Jan. 6, 2013), http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-01-06/opinions/36209022_1_david-h-petraeus-insurgents-generals.

Books.⁴³ Colonel Gentile takes Kaplan to task for his “part in the promotion of the myth of American counterinsurgency and the idea that it was a better way of war.”⁴⁴ Gentile argues that COIN was not a better way of war and Kaplan’s book is needlessly focused on its development rather than its failure.⁴⁵ He further argues that, aside from the concluding couple of chapters where Kaplan presents a “fundamentally correct criticism,” *The Insurgents* is “nothing more than a paean to Petraeus and the COIN experts.”⁴⁶

Gentile’s criticism is misplaced. There is no doubt that Kaplan presents Petraeus as a crusading warrior for COIN. But he balances it with a fair analysis of Petraeus’s and COIN’s limits.⁴⁷ The weaknesses of Kaplan’s argument lie elsewhere, and they are both procedural and substantive. First, procedurally, Kaplan’s story is difficult to follow because he jumps from one time period to another during the development of COIN. He also weaves in a large number of characters who had a hand in developing COIN.⁴⁸ A reader may need a flow chart to follow all of the individuals Kaplan writes about and to determine their relationship to General Petraeus and the COIN movement. Kaplan’s argument would have been more successful (and easier to read) if he had focused on the insurgents who had a direct effect on the Army’s COIN strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan, rather than bit players and side issues.⁴⁹ Second, substantively, Kaplan chooses to focus on the insurgents’ failure to make COIN the Army’s overarching way to fight future wars over the insurgents’ success in making the Army more flexible, more adaptive, and a “learning organization.”⁵⁰ Kaplan

acknowledges that the insurgents were partially successful,⁵¹ but buries this under his view that their push for COIN was ultimately a failure. Kaplan’s thesis would have been stronger if he had focused on the bigger picture: the insurgents changed the way the Army reacts and adapts to the enemy, and they changed how the Army learns from its mistakes. In other words, the insurgents were unsuccessful in installing COIN as the way to fight all of America’s wars, but that would have been counterproductive. The insurgents ultimately did change the culture of the Army to allow for different views and the development of new strategies to defeat America’s enemies, whether in a large war, a small war, or small wars within big wars. This success will serve the Army well in future wars.

VII. Conclusion

The Insurgents can serve as a guide (and a cautionary tale) for Army leaders facing a challenge that calls for a new way of thinking. It shows how resistant to change the Army is, even when facts and circumstances call for a change. After years of planning for conventional warfare, 9/11 was a wake-up call for the Army. It was no longer fighting a war against an enemy massed on the plains of Europe. This new enemy was made up of shadowy figures flying planes into buildings in our most populous city. The enemy was now fighting with improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and rocket-propelled grenades as the military went house to house looking for them.⁵² But the Army leadership and Defense establishment⁵³ remained mired in the old way of thinking about war. The insurgents offered an alternative strategy and plotted to make it happen by working both within and outside of the Army power structure. Eventually, after years of working in the background, it worked.

In the end, the Army did change and the insurgents’ plot paid off. But the plot fell victim to the adage, “the enemy has a vote,” meaning that “you can go into battle with a brilliant plan, but if the enemy adapts and shifts gears, the plan is rendered worthless after the first shots are fired.”⁵⁴

⁴³ Gian Gentile, *Review of The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War*, N.Y. J. OF BOOKS (Jan. 2, 2012), <http://www.nyjournalofbooks.com/review/insurgents-david-petraeus-and-plot-change-american-way-war>.

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ Perry, *supra* note 30.

⁴⁸ KAPLAN, *supra* note 1, at 397. At times, it seems as though Kaplan told the back story of each of the more than 100 people he interviewed for the book.

⁴⁹ *Id.* at 279–83. Kaplan uses several pages to talk about H.R. McMaster’s and John Nagl’s promotion boards and the boards’ decisions not to select the two for promotion, and attributes their non-selection to their close association to the COINdinitas. While it gave yet another example that the Army is resistant to change and (at least in Kaplan’s view) rewards those who toe the line, it went too far afield.

⁵⁰ *Id.* at 361. A “learning organization” is one that, as part of its culture, reviews its past mistakes and ensures that it does not repeat the same mistakes in the future. John Nagl, author of *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, studied how the British succeeded in defeating the Malayan insurgency in the 1950s, and contrasted that with how the United States failed to defeat the Viet Cong in the 1960s. His conclusion was that the difference between the British victory and the defeat in Vietnam was “best explained by the differing organizational cultures of the two armies; in short, that the British army was a learning institution and the American

army was not.” *Id.* The Insurgents, as part of the COIN strategy, sought to change the culture in the U.S. Army so that it became an organization that learned from past mistakes and did not repeat them in the future.

⁵¹ *Id.*

⁵² See generally DAVID KILCULLEN, *THE ACCIDENTAL GUERRILLA: FIGHTING SMALL WARS IN THE MIDST OF A BIG ONE* 115 (2009) (describing the Iraqi insurgency tactics during the 2007 Surge); see also STEVEN METZ, *LEARNING FROM IRAQ: COUNTERINSURGENCY IN AMERICAN STRATEGY* (2007) (describing the Iraq insurgency and the tactics used by insurgents).

⁵³ KAPLAN, *supra* note 1, at 171. At a press conference in late 2003, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Peter Pace, referred to the enemy in Iraq as insurgents. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld “standing at his side, brusquely admonished him, insisting that the resisters in Iraq were too disorganized to merit the i-word.” *Id.*

⁵⁴ *Id.* at 362.

Kaplan correctly points out in his final analysis that the insurgents did not change the way America fights its wars in the way they originally intended.⁵⁵ However, Kaplan failed to focus on the ultimate success of the insurgents. The leaders and Soldiers who served in Iraq and Afghanistan with General Petraeus and the other insurgents fought wars in ways the old hands in the Pentagon would never have thought of. The lessons learned (both good and bad) from Iraq and Afghanistan will inform the Army's operations in

the next war and beyond. *The Insurgents* reminds Army leaders (including judge advocates⁵⁶) that there are limits to those lessons: it is most important for the Army to be flexible, pragmatic, and focused on problem-solving to win the wars of the future.

⁵⁵ *Id.* at 365.

⁵⁶ *Id.* at 164. Kaplan says that Petraeus “sometimes talked about an army of ‘pentathlete’ Soldiers and counterinsurgency as one piece in a broader doctrine of ‘full-spectrum operations.’” *Id.* The insurgents changed the way the Army works and talks. The JAG Corps has adopted the insurgents’ language and encourages its lawyers to be “pentathletes”—in other words, be able to do many things well.