

Evidentiary Validation of FM 3–24 Counterinsurgency Worldwide, 1978–2008

By CHRISTOPHER PAUL and COLIN P. CLARKE

The Joint Doctrine section of *JFQ* 58 (3^d Quarter 2010) contained a lively exchange between Colonel Gian Gentile, USA, and Dr. John Nagl over the principles advanced in Field Manual (FM) 3–24, *Counterinsurgency*, and how those principles were developed and codified into doctrine.¹ One of the issues raised in this exchange was the extent to which current counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine was debated and discussed prior to the manual's publication. We have nothing to contribute to that part of the discussion. Where we do wish to contribute is with regard to concerns raised about the demonstrated efficacy of the COIN principles embodied in FM 3–24.

Insurgency has been the most prevalent form of armed conflict since at least 1949.² Countering insurgents, or supporting the counterinsurgency efforts of allies and partners, is the primary focus of ongoing operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Such operations are also likely to remain the U.S. emphasis should the Nation become involved (or further involved) in places such as Somalia, Yemen, and Pakistan. Because of growing disparities between the capabilities of conventional and unconventional forces, insurgents, terrorists, and militias are likely to become increasingly common foes.³ U.S. doctrine for countering insurgencies matters now and is likely to continue to matter.

Colonel Gentile contends that FM 3–24 relies on “unproven theories and assumptions about insurgencies and how to counter them,”⁴ criticizes the empirical and theoretical foundation of the doctrine as based on wars of independence that happened over 40

years ago,⁵ and concludes that FM 3–24 principles and methods “have not been shown to work in past and current operational practice.”⁶

But the question remains: Whether it was sufficiently debated or not, and whether it was formulated on the basis of a small number of older cases or not, *how have the principles espoused in FM 3–24 performed in recent history?*

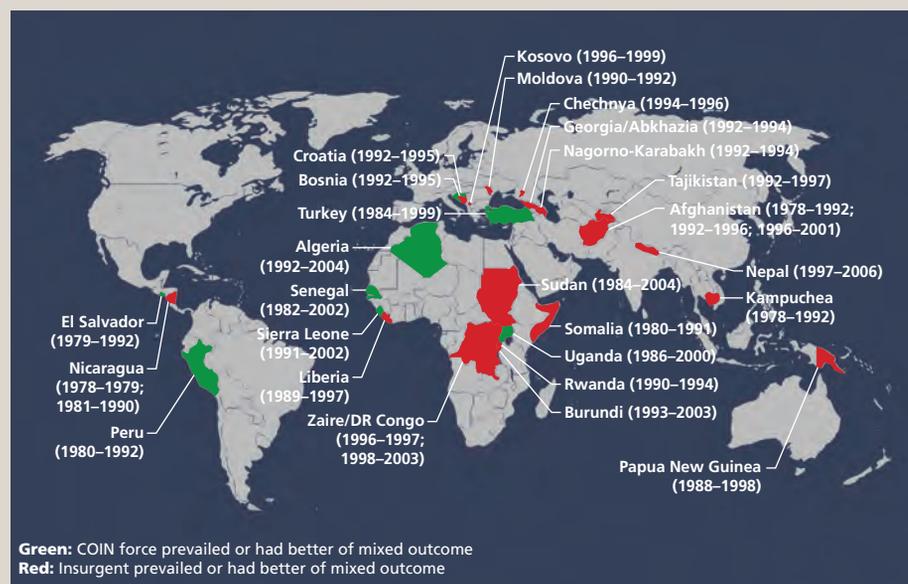
Neither party to the discussion above offered much beyond references to general history or perhaps to one or two arbitrarily selected cases in support of his views.⁷ Here, we bring the weight of substantial and systematic historical evidence to bear. We find that the record of recent history (insurgencies worldwide from 1978 to 2008) supports the principles espoused in FM 3–24. The vast majority of governments and COIN forces

that adhered to multiple tenets of the manual prevailed over the insurgencies they opposed. In the preponderance of insurgencies in which COIN forces did *not* follow the principles of FM 3–24, they lost.

The Evidence

These findings are based on data collected for and published as part of a recent RAND study, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers: Sources of Success in Counterinsurgency*.⁸ In it, we compiled detailed case studies for the 30 most recent resolved insurgencies.⁹ This proved to be all insurgencies worldwide started and concluded from 1978 to 2008. Individual cases were compiled from multiple secondary sources and are quite rich and detailed. The cases, their date ranges, and their global distribution are depicted in the map below.

Map of Studied COIN Case Dates, Countries, and Outcomes



Source: Figure 2.1 in Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, and Beth Grill, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers: Sources of Success in Counterinsurgency*, MG–964–OSD (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2010). Used with permission.

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In 8 of the 30 cases, the COIN force prevailed or had the better of a mixed outcome. These areas are shaded green in the map. In the remaining 22 cases, the insurgents prevailed or had the better of a mixed outcome; these areas are shaded red. Note that in all countries that hosted more than one insurgency during the time span, the insurgents won in every case (so the red shading accurately applies to all cases in those countries).

- The majority of the population in the area of conflict supported or favored the COIN force.

- The COIN force avoided culturally offensive behaviors and messages.

The balance of these factors proved a powerful predictor of COIN case outcomes between 1978 and 2008. Seven of the eight cases in which the COIN force prevailed had at least three of the nine FM 3–24 factors

COIN force (Turkey, 1984–1999, and Croatia, 1992–1995), and in both those cases, the COIN force engaged in a substantial number of positive COIN practices that offset the impact of repression.¹³

Worse, we found evidence that repression can appear to give the COIN force the upper hand temporarily while decreasing long-term prospects for success. In 19 intermediate phases in the cases (that is, *not* the decisive phase), the COIN force had the upper hand but ultimately lost in a later phase (so they won the phase and lost the case). Seventeen of those 19 winning phases on the way to a case loss included COIN force employment of both escalating repression and collective punishment. Many of the detailed narratives follow this general progression: Once the government decides to take an insurgency seriously, it sends in its military with few restraints. This COIN force smashes the insurgents *and* the population, dealing a heavy blow to the insurgents while significantly alienating the population in the area of conflict. In a later phase, the insurgents recover and gain strength and effectiveness through the (now dramatically increased) support of the population.

Our analysis also considered the legitimacy of the use of force in insurgencies over the past 30 years. Legitimate use of force was represented by five factors:

- The COIN force avoided excessive collateral damage, disproportionate use of force, or other illegitimate applications of force.

- COIN force collateral damage was *not* perceived by the population in the area of conflict as worse than that of the insurgent.

- In the area of conflict, the COIN force was *not* perceived as worse than the insurgents.

- The perception of security was created or maintained among populations in areas that the COIN force claimed to control.

- The COIN force was *not* viewed as an occupying force in the area of conflict.

The presence of these factors was also correlated with COIN success. Six of 8 winning COIN forces realized at least 3 of the 5 legitimacy-of-force factors in the decisive phase of their case compared to only 3 of 22 losing COIN forces.

Bottom line: Repression reliably wins phases, not cases. When force is used, care must be taken to ensure that it is legitimate

while killing or capturing insurgents is an important element of any effective COIN operation, our research demonstrates the importance of preserving the legitimacy of the use of force

As part of the case-study analysis, we scored the presence or absence of 77 different factors potentially related to COIN outcomes for each phase of each insurgency case.¹⁰ Subsets of these factors were specifically identified as representative of competing approaches to COIN. The approaches tested included FM 3–24 explicitly.¹¹

Test of History

In our analysis, the application of FM 3–24 was represented by the presence or absence of nine factors in each phase of each of the 30 insurgencies shown on the map. The factors were as follows:

- A perception of security was created or maintained among the population in areas that the COIN force controlled or claimed to control.

- Government corruption was reduced or good governance increased since the onset of the conflict.

- Insurgent-claimed grievances were substantially addressed since the onset of the conflict.

- The COIN force sought to engage and establish positive relations with the population in the area of conflict.

- The COIN force provided or ensured the provision of basic services in areas that it controlled or claimed to control.

- There were short-term investments, improvements in infrastructure or development, or property reform in the area controlled or claimed by the COIN force.

- The COIN force received substantial intelligence from a population in the area of conflict.

present in the decisive phase. In contrast, in only one of the cases in which the insurgents prevailed (Kampuchea, 1978–1992) did the COIN force realize at least three of the nine factors. *This represents a remarkably strong correlation between the application of FM 3–24 principles and success in COIN.*

On Firepower

In addition to railing against the “unproven” assumptions underpinning the principles espoused in FM 3–24, Colonel Gentile attacks the operational emphasis on restraint in firepower that results. Because of the “stock mantra” that the greater the number of civilians killed, the greater the number of insurgents made, he argues, “firepower . . . has come to be viewed as something dirty, bad, and to be avoided.”¹²

While killing or capturing insurgents is an important element of any effective COIN operation, our research unambiguously demonstrates the importance of avoiding repressive tactics and preserving the legitimacy of the use of force.

In our analysis, the repression-based “crush them” approach to COIN is represented by two factors:

- The COIN force employed escalating repression.

- The COIN force employed collective punishment.

In the 30 insurgencies fought between 1978 and 2008, fully 20 included the COIN force employing both escalating repression and collective punishment in the decisive phase. Of those 20, only 2 were wins for the

and that civilian casualties are minimized. After all, COIN is complex and not a zero-sum game. Combined arms prowess and effective restraint both belong in the doctrinal toolbox.

So the principles in FM 3–24 showed strongly in insurgencies worldwide over the past 30 years, not just ambiguously in wars of independence more than 40 years ago, as Colonel Gentile argued. While the details of FM 3–24, like all doctrine, should be subjected to continuing scrutiny and refinement based on operational experience, there appear to be no grounds in the past 30 years of insurgency worldwide for any attack on the core principles of FM 3–24. Similarly, firepower need not be wholly eschewed in COIN, but the record of history suggests that victory over the long term is much more likely to go to those who are judicious in their application of force. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ See Gian P. Gentile, “Time for the Deconstruction of Field Manual 3–24,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 58 (3^d Quarter, 2010); John A. Nagl, “Constructing the Legacy of Field Manual 3–24,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 58 (3^d Quarter, 2010); Gian P. Gentile, “Freeing the Army from the Counterinsurgency Straightjacket,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 58 (3^d Quarter, 2010); John A. Nagl, “Learning and Adapting to Win,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 58 (3^d Quarter, 2010).

² Thomas X. Hammes, “Why Study Small Wars?” *Small Wars Journal* 1, no. 1 (April 2005).

³ Michael T. Klare notes that of the 50 armed conflicts that broke out in the 1990s, only 4 entailed combat between 2 or more states, and only 1, the Persian Gulf War, involved all-out fighting among large numbers of ground, sea, and air forces. See Michael T. Klare, “The New Face of Combat: Terrorism and Irregular Warfare in the 21st Century,” in *The New Global Terrorism: Characteristics, Causes, Controls*, ed. Charles W. Kegley, Jr. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 29.

⁴ Gentile, “Time,” 116.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁶ Gentile, “Freeing,” 121.

⁷ Colonel Gentile has written repeatedly on the topic of COIN doctrine. All of his articles on the subject follow the same basic themes: He attacks the creators and proponents of population-centric COIN or FM 3–24 as conspirators of some kind, argues that the doctrine they have promoted is not only wrong but also actually dangerous, and advances the view that more firepower, not less, is the real solution to an insurgency. However, beyond some case detail from Vietnam and Iraq and general references to the American Civil War and World War II, he offers virtually no evidence

to support his criticisms or his own claims. For examples of these arguments, see Gian P. Gentile, “A (Slightly) Better War: A Narrative and Its Defects,” *World Affairs* (Summer 2008), available at <www.worldaffairsjournal.org/articles/2008-Summer/full-Gentile.html>; “Our COIN Doctrine Removes the Enemy from the Essence of War,” *Armed Forces Journal* (January 2008), available at <www.armedforcesjournal.com/2008/01/3207722>; “Misreading the Surge Threatens U.S. Army’s Conventional Capabilities,” *World Politics Review* (March 4, 2008); “Not So Big of a Tent,” March 4, 2008, available at <<http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2008/03/not-so-big-of-a-tent/>>; “The Death of the Armor Corps,” April 17, 2010, available at <<http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/416-gentile.pdf>>; “Gaining the Initiative in Afghanistan,” September 2, 2009, available at <<http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/288-gentile.pdf>>; “A Strategy of Tactics: Population-Centric COIN and the Army,” *Parameters* (Autumn 2009), 5–17.

⁸ Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, and Beth Grill, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers: Sources of Success in Counterinsurgency*, MG–964–OSD (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2010).

⁹ Based on a list developed by Martin C. Libicki, “Eighty-Nine Insurgencies: Outcomes and Endings,” in *War by Other Means: Building Complete and Balanced Capabilities for Counterinsurgency*, ed. David C. Gompert et al., MG–595/2–OSD (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008), 373–396. The initial case list with which Libicki began was drawn from James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War,” *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (February 2003).

¹⁰ For details on the factors, their scoring, and how the phases were identified, see Paul, Clarke, and Grill, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers: Sources of Success in Counterinsurgency*. For a detailed narrative of the case and the scores of the 77 factors for all phases of each case, see Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, and Beth Grill, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers: Detailed Counterinsurgency Case Studies*, MG–964/1–OSD (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2010).

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of and evidence for all 20 approaches to COIN considered in the research, see Paul, Clarke, and Grill, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers: Sources of Success in Counterinsurgency*.

¹² Gentile, “Freeing,” 122.

¹³ See chapter five in Paul, Clarke, and Grill, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers: Sources of Success in Counterinsurgency*.



for the
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ACSS Research Paper No. 1
Enhancing Civilian Protection in Peace Operations: Insights from Africa

by Paul D. Williams

Protection of civilians, which is “the very essence of peacekeeping,” poses huge challenges in African security. Paul D. Williams first examines empirical cases in Rwanda, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Sudan to both define the problem and find innovative solutions. He then summarizes the interrelated streams of thought and developments in law and humanitarian agencies, including the United Nations, that helped create the universally endorsed “responsibility to protect” principle. After discussing the challenges that civilian protection presents for peacekeepers on the ground, he examines how civilian protection policies might be enhanced. He concludes with 10 policy recommendations, such as strengthening deterrence, devising clear operational concepts, investing in quality peacekeepers and leaders, being prepared to coerce perpetrators, and keeping humanitarian military intervention on the table.



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