

THE HEGEMON'S DILEMMA

Austin Long

The Accidental Guerilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One

David Kilcullen

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Conducting wartime analysis is tantamount to blind men describing an elephant: each may touch a different part and discover a different animal. David Kilcullen's *The Accidental Guerilla* makes sensible strategic points and provides a wealth of detail on conflicts from Indonesia to Iraq, but in the case of the latter conflict at least, he and I clearly touched different parts of the proverbial elephant (Baghdad in his case, Anbar province in mine). Despite our differing understandings of the Iraq case, however, I am fundamentally in agreement with much of Kilcullen's strategic assessment.

The central concept of Kilcullen's book is the titular "accidental guerilla," the result of a four phase cycle of politics and violence. In the first phase (infection), Al Qaeda or a similar extremist movement establishes a base in a remote or ungoverned area where it has a haven but not necessarily a warm welcome from the locals. From this base, extremists spread their message by word and deed (contagion). The presence of these extremists, however, provokes an outside power to enter the region seeking to destroy the base (intervention). Finally, this intervention provokes the locals who, whatever their feelings about Al Qaeda, rise up against the intervention (rejection). This process of rejection means that intervention, far from destroying the extremists, can actually make them stronger as they fight shoulder to shoulder with these accidental guerillas, becoming increasingly intertwined with them over time.

The basic conceptual framework of the accidental guerilla is not new. In the 1960s, analysts from across the world recognized that efforts to repress extremism—in this case often nationalist and/or communist rather than Islamist—often provoked a backlash that actually empowered the extremists. Writers ranging from Constantin Melnik, the former special adviser on security to French premier Michel Debré, to Daniel Ellsberg, a hawkish RAND analyst who later turned against the war in Vietnam, described this as akin to judo, whereby the extraordinary power of the modern state is turned against itself. Violent repression of extremism would antagonize the local population, who would then lend more support to extremists, provoking more repression in an escalating spiral.

Kilcullen updates and recasts this framework in terms of the so-called "global

war on terror” (or “long war” or “late unpleasantness” or whatever the preferred nomenclature for this twilight struggle is). The more the United States seeks to directly confront Islamic extremism through military intervention, the more it will provoke resistance. This argument should have intuitive appeal to the citizens of a country born in rebellion against distant authority, many of whom have seen the 1977 movie *Star Wars* and will recall Princess Leia’s declaration that forming a tighter grip on local populations merely causes them to slip through one’s fingers.

Part of the problem with America’s approach to handling extremists in remote locales is that most Americans cannot visualize their nation as an equivalent to the Empire, the evil galactic political power in *Star Wars*. This is not to say that the United States is directly analogous to the Empire, but people in many parts of the world do see U.S. military uniforms as equivalent to the iconic white armor of the Imperial stormtrooper from the movie (though with vastly better aim). Kilcullen provides a vital corrective to American self-perception, demonstrating that sometimes less is more when it comes to combating extremism.

From this critical observation flow a number of sensible policy recommendations. The most important of these is the emphasis on what is termed the “indirect approach,” which means working by, with and through local partners to combat extremism, while keeping U.S. profile as low as possible. This U.S. profile should be principally civilian, with any required military presence being kept as unobtrusive as possible. Direct counterinsurgency by U.S. military forces should be the last resort.

The problem of the indirect approach is that it relies on having viable local partners. Sometimes these partners are readily at hand, as Kilcullen notes of the insurgency in southern Thailand, where Western assistance to the Thai government has been effective but nearly invisible. A similar but somewhat more visible effort has also been ongoing in the Philippines. Providing unobtrusive aid to foreign allies to support the fight against terror is eminently sensible (though I would argue it should not be conceived of as a “global counterinsurgency” campaign). Local partners, however, are not always at hand or may be problematic in some way, thus making strategic questions much more difficult.

It is here that the different visions of the proverbial elephant become important. In Kilcullen’s narrative, the United States, through a combination of more troops—who managed to avoid creating more accidental guerillas—and better operations, earned cooperation from local populations in Iraq who did not care for the extremists but were terrified of them. The story in Anbar province, however, occurred in a different sequence, with locals turning against the extremists before partnering with the United States. Indeed, the term “red-on-red” violence emerged in 2005 in Anbar to describe what the U.S. saw as groups who were still fighting

Americans also beginning to fight one another. This violence had its origins in a complex set of dynamics specific to certain regions or towns rather than in a more general tribal or nationalist reaction to extremism. This suggests radically less agency should be accorded to both U.S. troop levels and U.S. operations in some cases—though neither is irrelevant.

In Afghanistan, the United States has a different problem. It has had local allies since the very beginning. Unfortunately, these local allies are principally Uzbeks, Tajiks, Hazara and a few smaller ethnic groups with only a limited number of Pashtun tribes. It is thus unsurprising that the insurgency in Afghanistan is predominantly a Pashtun phenomenon, dominated by the Pashtun “have-nots” who, as Kilcullen notes, are supported by at least some elements of the Pakistani government. Finding additional local Pashtun partners may be quite difficult in this environment, especially since the main U.S. Pashtun ally, President Hamid Karzai, has not covered himself in glory.

The problem of local partners is not unique to Iraq or Afghanistan. In Somalia, the international community has supported a moribund transition government against vastly more effective Islamists, who themselves emerged in part as a response to tribally-based lawlessness (also part of the origin of the Taliban in Afghanistan). In Pakistan, the government is a partial ally and a partial enemy, with some elements supporting Afghan extremists even as the government leadership seeks help against domestic Pakistani militants. The great strategic question that emerges from Kilcullen’s assessment is how to deal with problems for which the indirect approach is not entirely viable while avoiding the creation of a new generation of accidental guerillas. 