Counterinsurgency Knowledge and the Shadow University World

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There is a shadow university world in America. This world exists outside the United States, too, but here I write primarily about its US incarnation. America’s shadow university world is part of the national security complex. It includes both military institutions of advanced learning and “civilian” institutes of study. Few academics know much about this world. It is not easy to research in detail, and it rarely intersects with most pathways of university life. This shadow world is murky and opaque. For example, it is unclear how the military simulacra of civilian universities do their hiring and promotion of faculty—whether, say, they employ the standard methods of peer search committees and tenure review. If you teach at a civilian college or university and you think your institution’s hiring and promotion practices are obscure, you are probably right. But most institutions of higher education seem quite transparent when compared to the shadow university world.

Basic to this alternative institutional apparatus are the war colleges and the National Defense University (NDU) of the US military. The Naval War College was created in 1884 (in coastal Rhode Island), the Army War College in 1901 (it started out at Fort McNair in Washington, DC, then had a second incarnation at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and now resides in Carlisle, Pennsylvania). Air University, in Alabama, houses the Air War College, and the Marine Corps War College resides at the Marine Corps University in Quantico, Virginia. The NDU unites five other schools: the Joint Forces Staff College, the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, the National War College, the Information Resources Management College, and the College of International Security Affairs. As well, the US Army Command and General Staff College is now located at Fort Leavenworth. And, of course, there are also the historic military
academies for the youngest officers in training—in West Point, Annapolis, and Colorado Springs, as well as New London (the Coast Guard) and Kings Point (the Merchant Marine).

A major purpose of these schools is to provide advanced classroom training for officers who are being groomed for the conventional military responsibility of organizing warfighting. But the courses of study available at such military schools also overlap with the curricula of civilian schools of advanced study in national security leadership. “Strategic” is a word used frequently at these institutions: “strategic studies” and “strategic leadership,” for example. “Security” comes up a lot, too, framed as part of an academic subject, as in “security studies.” In a world where the uniformed military often appears to be the primary instrument of US foreign policy, it no doubt seems sensible to the military officer corps to train its members to make foreign policy—but always, of course, in the context of military conquest or occupation (sometimes called peacekeeping).

I am a bit skeptical about the need for all these military colleges, and a consideration of the possible reasons for their proliferation may yield insights into the evolution of our empire’s intellectual infrastructure. The sheer number of schools suggests there is something going on here besides the production of officers who are competent to meet the demands of the national security state. Of course, inter-service rivalry may produce some needless institutional multiplication. But another explanation, one often overlooked, may be the thirst for intellectual legitimacy, and the authority it can bring, among the warrior class.

It may be challenging to staff all these institutions with adequate faculty. Courses in war-making technique may be taught by those drawn from an internal pool of practitioners. But the programs in strategy and security affairs are another matter. In my own field, history, one of these colleges may occasionally publicly post a job listing, but that cannot be their primary means of finding and hiring civilian faculty. One can only guess at the military colleges’ hiring methods and standards, conditions of employment, and expectations in terms of scholarly and professional development.
Consider now the civilian “schools of advanced study” that focus on national security questions. These are often officially linked to well-known universities but really bear only the most tenuous of connections to those universities. These effectively freestanding graduate schools award advanced degrees, usually in “international affairs,” “strategic studies,” or related “fields,” and those earning such degrees are routinely funneled toward positions in the US State Department or other security agencies. The granddaddy of them all is the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS—pronounced to rhyme with “ice”), which is part of Johns Hopkins University. SAIS is located in Washington, DC; Johns Hopkins is in Baltimore. Faculty members at SAIS are regularly interviewed, or publish opinion pieces, in the news media, and such individuals are often described as “professors of political science at Johns Hopkins University.” But Johns Hopkins has its own political science faculty. SAIS faculty members have no real relationship to the political science department, except on paper. Does anyone have a notion of how SAIS “professors” are hired and promoted? Do they have tenure? Tammi L. Gutner’s slim institutional history, *The Story of SAIS* (1987), sheds only a dim light on such questions.

These institutional issues matter, since the traditional practices of quality control in university faculties—ones that, I hasten to add, do not always work the way they ought to—contribute significantly, even if in ways that are unclear to the general public, to the intellectual credibility of faculty members. Institutions like SAIS seek to leverage the authority of university tradition when they present their faculty members to the press and public not simply as policy analysts but as professors. Perhaps surprisingly, such a distinction seems worth making to well-placed, influential persons. Consider the late Fouad Ajami, a leading SAIS figure for decades and a television showman who urged forward US wars in the Middle East. Ajami’s authority was bolstered not only by his Lebanese American identity, but also by his possession of many of the requisites of an impressive academic career, including a PhD from Princeton University and authorship of books like *The Arab Predicament* (1981) and
The Dream Palace of the Arabs (1998). Ajami played the role of worldly professor to the hilt, but he was far from the worst abuser of the university world’s intellectual capital at SAIS. At least Ajami wrote books.

Consider Paul Wolfowitz. He is not, as Ajami was, a paradigmatic case of the quotable SAIS expert. Never a show horse, Wolfowitz is, instead, the ultimate behind-the-scenes pseudoacademic powerhouse, always termed brilliant by his promoters but rarely asked to prove it. He rose to the top at SAIS, becoming its dean in 1994, a position he held until he joined the incoming presidential administration of George W. Bush in 2001. Andrew Bacevich, brought into the SAIS orbit by Wolfowitz in the 1990s, recalls him as verbally facile—a big-picture man—but shallow. Apparently Wolfowitz was a very successful fundraiser for SAIS, and built up their program in international finance. The 1990s were a good time to secure cash from deep-pocketed patrons.

If Wolfowitz had compiled a record of impressively insightful commentary, then we might dismiss critics like Bacevich. But no. Wolfowitz has always played the inside game, focusing on impressing the right mentor with the right connections. As an undergraduate at Cornell, Wolfowitz formed a bond with the philosophy professor Allan Bloom, a devotee of the conservative political theorist Leo Strauss. This was long before Bloom became well known to the world at large for The Closing of the American Mind (1987), but even then, back in the late 1960s, he was someone with a pipeline to the University of Chicago, and he reportedly got Wolfowitz a fellowship to pay for graduate study in political science at that esteemed institution. Wolfowitz also won over the conservative political theorist Walter Berns, who wrote a fervent (if, perhaps, formulaic) letter of recommendation for the young man: “If there is a superior student at Cornell,” Berns wrote, “I am not aware of him.” Wolfowitz had never taken a class from Berns, but he had grown up in Ithaca and his father was a professor of statistics at Cornell. He therefore had a native son’s ingrained understanding of how the academic world works; patronage could be won outside the classroom. At Chicago,
Wolfowit, according to multiple accounts, enrolled in a couple of classes with Strauss himself. But his graduate mentor was Albert Wohlstetter, an advocate of preventive war decades before Bush, urged on by Wolfowitz, made this US government policy.

Wolfowitz left academia in the early 1970s after spending a few years teaching political science at Yale (he earned his PhD in 1972), and then rose quickly within the national security agencies of the US government. In 1981, under President Ronald Reagan, he assumed the role of policy planning director in the State Department (as George Kennan and Paul Nitze had done) and, after a spell in Jakarta as US ambassador, served as the brains behind the Pentagon’s “Defense Planning Guidance” of 1992 under President George H. W. Bush. This was the controversial expression of hope for “full-spectrum dominance” (as it was later called) by the United States now that its Cold War rival was kaput. Then Wolfowitz sat out Bill Clinton’s presidency at the helm of SAIS, and returned to the very cockpit of US strategy as deputy secretary of defense in 2001 under the second George Bush. Wolfowitz was second in command at the Pentagon, right under Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and was widely viewed as the big thinker in the building.

The world at large finally got a glimpse of Wolfowitz’s incredible incompetence, his residence in a make-believe world, and his willingness to say almost anything to support a cause to which he had committed himself, when he came forward to make his testimonial blunder before a congressional committee, in March 2003, stating that an invasion of Iraq would pay for itself through boosted petroleum revenues, an hypothesis that we then tested with disastrous results. Wolfowitz was also doggedly committed, in the face of contrary evidence, to the notion of meaningful links between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda. In a 2004 New Yorker article, the journalist Peter Boyer writes that Wolfowitz’s “intelligence is conceded by all, and his quiet bearing and manner suggest the academic that he used to be—at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies.” Yet Boyer notes that Wolfowitz has a habit of saying unintelligent things. Who are the “all” who “concede” Wolfowitz’s “intelligence”? 
One wonders. Boyer asks, “How can someone so smart, so knowing, speak—and even apparently think—so much like George Bush?” (meaning Bush 43). If Boyer were familiar with Occam’s razor, he might reach the logically parsimonious conclusion that, of course, Wolfowitz is not really “so smart.” A political liability once he actually became a recognized figure, Wolfowitz resigned from Bush’s Pentagon in 2005, and Bush foisted him on the World Bank as its new president. The directors there managed to get rid of him after two years. Still, he did what damage he could in the time he had. He tried to implant climate-change denial at the bank. He also brushed aside the recommendations of a search committee and hired someone he preferred. Perhaps he reasoned that he should make appointments based on the right assurances from the right mentors about the right protégés. This was how it worked in the world Wolfowitz knew, after all. But evidently the economists did not care for it. They booted him over his perceived corruption and cronyism (including advancing the career of his inamorata), but they may have also realized he was a bungler and an ignoramus.

SAIS is the biggest, but other security-studies think tanks crowd the Washington area. Some are degree-granting institutions, like SAIS, while others are simply policy shops. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), where Zbigniew Brzezinski (National Security Advisor to President Jimmy Carter) long has been the reigning eminence, has endowed chairs for its star players, but it is not a graduate school. Once upon a time, CSIS was linked to George-town University. One gets a sense of the entrepreneurial atmosphere of strategic studies, of the feeling that there is a hefty pie here to be sliced up, by noting the entrance of new players. Most recent is the Center for Security Policy Studies (CSPS), which started in 2014; it is part of the School of Policy, Government and International Affairs at George Mason University, which is located in Fairfax, in northern Virginia. But the CSPS is in Arlington, even closer to Washington and the Pentagon. The director of the CSPS is Audrey Cronin, who was an obscure counterterrorism policy hand in Washington before she was brought in (from 2005 to 2007) as the academic director at a
program on the Changing Character of War, housed within the history faculty of Pembroke College at the University of Oxford and funded by the Leverhulme Trust, the major source of private cash in British academia. (There is a strong Oxford connection in the networks I am describing here.) Then Cronin taught as a full professor at the National War College before taking the helm at George Mason’s new enterprise. Students can enroll at the CSPS and earn degrees as they learn from faculty members such as Michael Hayden, the former US director of central intelligence who distinguished himself with his mendacity before congressional committees on the subject of US government torture.

While it may be revealing to trace the disastrously easy rise to power and influence of a security-studies grandee like Wolfowitz, or the peregrinations and maneuverings of figures like Cronin or Hayden, when considering the shadow university world it is essential also to consider the expertise produced in that world. That production is, ostensibly, the reason for its existence. This means considering individuals with advanced degrees—some of whom earned those degrees within the shadow university world, and some of whom migrated there from elsewhere—and the intellectual work they do. This world consists of a variety of institutional arrangements, with degrees granted by and through various entities. It is a mistake to take any one of these arrangements as dominant or normative in the shadow university world, which is not only variable but highly flexible in its practices. Several figures—David Kilcullen, Montgomery McFate, David Petraeus, John Nagl, Sarah Sewall, and Conrad Crane, all discussed below—reveal distinct institutional linkages.

What brought all these individuals together intellectually—and, in many cases, literally—is the counterinsurgency project of the past decade or so. I do not refer to the efforts to implement counterinsurgency methods by US forces and their allies in Iraq and Afghanistan. Rather, I refer to the intellectual project of retrieving, rehabilitating, and repackaging counterinsurgency knowledge, which had been largely neglected within the military between the end of the US-Vietnam War in 1975 and 2004. Counterinsurgency
knowledge was the glue to which all these security intellectuals adhered, and it was also the career vehicle they all rode far. The counterinsurgency or COIN project became a means of producing and deploying authority within the shadow university world—and outside that world as well. This projection of intellectual authority from within the shadow university world into civilian life tells an important story about our country’s recent history: the US military and its quasicivilian associates have been throwing their weight around, filled with confidence that they can compete for political authority with the strictly civilian sector.

One needs to understand COIN’s history prior to 9/11 in order to appreciate how amazing the sudden leap to prominence by COIN advocates, starting in 2004, seemed to military strategists. Tracing COIN’s genealogy also quickly reveals its unsavory roots, ones that are sometimes ignored or hastily explained away. Back in the early 1960s, Kennedy administration heavyweights had been much taken with COIN ideas—chiefly, forced mass relocation—that had been imported from the British army’s successful twelve-year campaign (1948–60) to defeat the Communist-led insurgency in Malaya, after which the British handed political power into safe hands (in what had become the separate polities of Malaysia and Singapore). Latter-day COIN enthusiasts usually refer to Malaya as the great success story, often suggesting that there were other victories as well that for some reason go unspecified. But there were not, at least not on the part of Western powers after World War II. In many of the potted summaries of COIN success, it is all Malaya, all the time. The US-advised Philippine effort to quell the Hukbalahap rebellion (roughly 1947–52) also could be cited as a successful instance more often than it is; its attractiveness may be diminished because the state that emerged afterward does not seem terribly successful or appealing. The more numerous failed COIN campaigns (the French in Indochina and Algeria, the British in Kenya, the Dutch in Indonesia) get light treatment in the writings of COIN promoters.

The basic reason for COIN’s success in Malaya was an ethnic and political cleavage between the Chinese minority, which accounted
for most of the insurgent forces, and the Malay majority, which, over time, became a willing partner in the British anti-Chinese war. Under Kennedy, the United States was able to play on ethnic antagonism in recruiting the Hmong to fight against Laotian Communists, but within South Vietnam such rifts (focusing on various “Montagnard” peoples indigenous to the Central Highlands of Vietnam) were relatively minor and could not be exploited to create a popular alignment against the revolutionaries, whose demographic profile matched that of the vast majority of the population. COIN fell out of favor in Washington by 1965, outpaced by an escalation of conventional ground combat and airpower. Conservative revisionist historians of the Vietnam War, such as Lewis Sorley, author of *A Better War* (1999), often claim that the Phoenix Program, a large-scale effort at targeted killing used against the National Liberation Front in the war’s later years, was a successful return to COIN methods, one whose effectiveness came too late to persuade American leaders to renew their lost determination to win the war. The true nature of the Phoenix Program remains a hotly contested issue. But its defenders do, at least, concede, by implication, that COIN is not just a Peace Corps operation in uniform. It is about killing people—the right people.

An army officer named Andrew Krepinevich became the keeper of the COIN flame during the wilderness years of the 1980s and 1990s. He was awarded a PhD by Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, one of the best established public-policy schools in the country, and one that has provided a home for numerous champions of recent US military operations, sometimes within its Carr Center for Human Rights Policy. His dissertation became a book, *The Army and Vietnam* (1986), in which he argued that COIN was abandoned too soon in Vietnam, and that it might have worked if America had stuck with it. Krepinevich’s version of COIN neglects forced relocation, instead emphasizing the need for restraint and discrimination in the use of deadly force and the importance of small-unit operations that could simultaneously target insurgents and (in theory) build political credit among a supposedly neutral host.
population. However, this hearts-and-minds version of COIN is not as clearly distinguished from the palpably colonial forced-relocation version as writers like Krepinevich suggest. Krepinevich, in 2005, wrote an article in Foreign Affairs, “How to Win in Iraq”—subsequently promoted by David Brooks in his New York Times column—where he advocates an “oil-spot strategy,” in which foreign forces win over the contested populace by creating and slowly expanding palisaded enclaves where life will seem attractive. Neither Krepinevich nor Brooks mentions that the oil-spot metaphor comes directly from French colonial efforts in North Africa (la tache d’huile), which featured ambitious forced-relocation campaigns. The enclaves in which “the people” will be “protected” from the “insurgents”—to use standard COIN language—are always ones to which “the people” must be directed forcefully. This is not to say that the United States has engaged in mass expulsion in its recent wars. However, enthusiasts like Brooks write as if COIN either never had anything to do with such ugly colonial practices, or as if it could succeed today in the absence of such mass coercion. Outright colonialists of old were often more honest.

When the encore for COIN came in 2004—as Bush’s generals were frantic for some plan that might promise to salvage the “post-war” in Iraq—Krepinevich had become a somewhat senior security analyst, and was not called on stage. He had maintained a circle of followers in the 1990s, but they were an outsider group within the military, as Fred Kaplan, of Slate, made clear with the romantic title of his chronicle of recent COIN excitements, The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War (2013). When Wolfowitz needed ideas about how to defeat an increasingly potent insurgency in Iraq (really two insurgencies, one Shia and the other Sunni), he called on the Australian army officer David Kilcullen, whose writings probably seemed fresh. Kilcullen, who has worked in (and often for) the United States since 2004, retains, in part by virtue of his mildly exotic background, which carries the scent of imperial adventure, a sense of dash. In 2004, Wolfowitz learned of Kilcullen’s writings about the Indonesian government’s
counterinsurgency efforts in Java and East Timor, and, in a tale of rapid ascent worthy of Dickens, Wolfowitz brought Kilcullen to Virginia and tasked him with organizing a section of the Defense Department’s Quadrennial Defense Review on “irregular warfare.”

Kilcullen came to the Pentagon, assigned by a cooperative Australian military, and stayed on, shifting to the State Department’s counterterrorism shop and later retiring from the Australian Defence Forces. He continued to make forays into hot zones in Asia and Africa, and he kept on writing for his growing public. In 2006, as the COIN revival crested, he was the subject of a profile by a seemingly besotted George Packer in the New Yorker. Packer introduces Kilcullen as “the son of two left-leaning academics,” burnishing him for the magazine’s upscale audience with a polish of sophistication and seeking to immunize Kilcullen against hackneyed anti-imperialist charges of militarism, colonialism, and racism. Packer also notes that Kilcullen earned “a doctorate in political anthropology at the University of New South Wales” (UNSW) in Australia. But this is not exactly right. UNSW is located in Sydney. Kilcullen earned his degree at a special branch of UNSW that operates at the Australian Defence Forces Academy (ADFA) in Canberra. Graduates from the programs at UNSW at ADFA, which are oriented to the interests and needs of military personnel, have UNSW listed as their awarding university. The website of UNSW at ADFA lists no postgraduate program in “political anthropology” or in anthropology of any kind. However, it does give information about programs in politics and Indonesian Studies. The latter includes a PhD program in Southeast Asian Social Inquiry, and this seems the likeliest actual source of Kilcullen’s doctoral degree. I have no basis for asserting that this program is not intellectually rigorous or worthwhile for Australian military officers. Moreover, Kilcullen’s writings are by no means lacking in insight and intelligence. But it remains the case that those who wish to leverage Kilcullen’s intellectual capital in order to promote COIN efforts may, either through deliberate misstatement or through lazy research or sloppy writing, make his academic credentials seem something that they are not (quite). I leave it to Australian academics to decide
whether they are happy to have a leading university in their country provide customized, on-site degree programs to their country’s military. Kilcullen went on to appear as a guest on *The Colbert Report*—the hip COIN strategist.

It became known in 2008 that Kilcullen thought the United States’ invasion of Iraq had been (in his words) “stupid” and “an extremely serious strategic error.” However, he contended that once the United States had deposed Saddam and was the occupying power, it needed to make the best of it—“get on with the job at hand,” as he said—which meant consolidating power and turning it over to cooperative parties. Hence even those who had opposed the 2003 invasion, he implied, should have supported the subsequent counterinsurgency. Kilcullen also, after sticking it out to the end of the Bush administration, left US government service to become a surprisingly sharp critic of the Obama administration’s program of drone strikes, in Pakistan and elsewhere, which Kilcullen stated would net the United States an increased number of enemies in critical areas of the world. Kilcullen, not Obama, represents the liberal face of COIN, emphasizing narrowly targeted lethality, not bombings—regardless of how “smart” the bombs supposedly are.

Yet Packer also relates that, according to Kilcullen, “winning hearts and minds is not a matter of making local people like you…but of getting them to accept that supporting your side is in their interest, which requires an element of coercion.” Packer continues, “Kilcullen was describing a willingness to show local people that supporting the enemy risks harm and hardship.” This line of thinking represents a direct reversion to the Kennedy years, when American strategists thought a supposedly apolitical peasantry in Vietnam could be forced to make a rational choice about whom to support based on a comparative calculus of terror anticipated from Communists and anticommunists. What American policymakers at that time could not seem to contemplate was that an impoverished peasantry might not be apolitical, that they might be swept up in the excitement and commitment of revolutionary change. Although Kilcullen sometimes has shown sensitivity to the political world of insurgency, at other
moments he lapses into another perspective, one that has always ended badly for the United States.

Paradoxically, the most important of Kilcullen’s ideas combines sophistication toward, even sympathetic understanding of, insurgencies with the reasoning behind the most baleful and disastrous turns in US foreign policy history. As he suggests in the subtitle of a 2009 book, *Fighting Small Wars Inside of a Big One*, Kilcullen believes that the task facing the United States (and allies like Australia) is to develop strategies for “the long war.” The “global war on terror,” another popular term in the recent past, is in fact a “global counterinsurgency.” In this way, COIN ties the war on terror to endeavors like the Iraq occupation with the following syllogism: the war on terror is a global counterinsurgency; the United States faced insurgency in Iraq; the counterinsurgency effort in Iraq was part of the war on terror. More broadly, the idea of the “global counterinsurgency” turns teenagers with crude explosive devices, or even lesser destructive tools, into foot soldiers in a fearsome worldwide enemy force—an enemy suitable for World War IV (another term that has seen the light of day; the Cold War was World War III). Kilcullen argues in his recent work for the need to “disaggregate” this global war into a series of local struggles stemming from disparate sources and requiring distinct approaches. Of course these struggles have local causes and characters. And, of course, there would be less need to disaggregate them if people like Kilcullen had not worked so hard to help Bush and Wolfowitz aggregate them in the first place.

While Kilcullen is a kind of celebrity policy hand with some training in anthropology, the leading figure in plugging anthropologists more directly into military policy in recent years has been Montgomery McFate, who took her PhD in anthropology, earned at Yale, directly into military employment. After writing her dissertation on British COIN methods in Northern Ireland, McFate moved from a fellowship at the Office of Naval Research to the army, becoming chief social scientist for the army’s Human Terrain System (HTS) in 2005. This project provided funds to place anthropologists and other social scientists inside the US Army in both Afghanistan and Iraq.
The slightly creepy name aside, the idea behind the HTS was simple: if US forces were trying to win the occupation in either country, and to do so by some means other than killing massive numbers of insurgents—if they wanted to win those storied hearts and minds—then they needed basic knowledge about the local cultures. Actually, they needed such knowledge even if they just wanted to kill the right people.

George Packer puffed McFate in the same article where he promoted Kilcullen, and used the same bag of tricks for both subjects. McFate, Packer writes, has “hair cut stylishly short and an air of humorous cool,” and “grew up in the sixties on a communal houseboat in Marin County,” raised by what McFate calls her “hippie parents.” McFate plays up her youthful antimilitarism, telling Packer, “When I was little in California, we never believed there was such a thing as the Cold War. That was a bunch of lies that the government fed us to keep us paranoid. Of course, there was a thing called the Cold War, and we nearly lost.” She goes on to compare the global counterinsurgency-cum-war on terror—which she, eliding such complexities, simply calls “this thing that’s happening now”—to the Cold War. I am not sure which is more ridiculous: this analogy or McFate’s recently acquired belief that the United States “nearly lost” the Cold War. In any case, she is cool and had hippie parents, so we should take her enthusiasm for “this thing that’s happening now” seriously.

McFate has argued against the post-Vietnam reaction among anthropologists to their discipline’s long history of what McFate herself calls, in a 2005 article in the journal Military Review, its service “as an intellectual tool to consolidate imperial power.” This disarming candor, offered specifically in the context of British anthropology, quickly gives way to an approving discussion of anthropologists’ work with the US military in World War II and the Cold War, which, one infers, are not to be understood as imperial ventures. McFate includes a reasonably informative brief account of the controversies generated by the short-lived Project Camelot, which, in the mid-1960s, sought to put US anthropologists to work in South
America monitoring revolutionary insurgencies, presumably to help foreign governments repress such uprisings. But McFate contends that anthropologists overreacted to such episodes, displaying “deep isolationist tendencies” and engaging in “a brutal process of self-flagellation.” Indeed, anthropology became the most self-critical of all social sciences; since 1974, the discipline has supported a journal called Critique of Anthropology. McFate obviously disapproves of this and urges her fellow scholars to help the military do its job well and humanely. She deploys the standard COIN words of comfort for a liberal audience, writing, “Often, the application of overwhelming force has the negative, unintended effect of strengthening the insurgency by creating martyrs, increasing recruitment, and demonstrating the ‘brutality’ of state forces,” and suggests that social scientists can assist the wiser heads within the uniformed services in making war with a minimum of bloodshed and a maximum of success.

Such assurances have not gone unrebutted, and McFate found her particular nemesis in David Price, a professor of anthropology and sociology (he is an anthropologist by training) at St. Martin’s University, in Lacey, Washington. He has written many works about anthropologists’ participation in military and imperial affairs, including the excellent Weaponizing Anthropology: Social Science in Service of the Militarized State (2011). Price went after McFate specifically for what he showed to be extensive plagiarism in a piece McFate reportedly authored. This was a chapter in the U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Manual (U.S. Army Field Manual No. 3-24; Marine Corps Warfighting Publication No. 3-33.5), which was published—in a highly unusual move regarding such a military manual, and one distinguished by enormous publicity—by the University of Chicago Press in 2007, following its internal promulgation in late 2006. This Manual catalyzed the surge in COIN policy and brought together many of the individuals discussed here.

Authorship of the Manual is sometimes attributed, by lazy journalists, to General David Petraeus (late of the Central Intelligence Agency), a claim that Petraeus never made. But Petraeus did order the Manual’s production in late 2005, after returning from a tour of
duty in Iraq and taking charge of the army’s Combined Arms Center in Fort Leavenworth, where official US military doctrines are composed. Petraeus earned a PhD from the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton and, during the post-2004 COIN craze, became the supreme example of the warrior intellectual in the public mind, endlessly featured in news reports as America’s brainiest commanding general. Price notes, in his 2007 documentation of plagiarism in the Manual in the online bulletin CounterPunch, that “claims of academic integrity are the very foundation of the Manual’s promotional strategy. Somewhere along the line, Petraeus’s doctorate became more important than his general’s stars, touted by Petraeus’s claque in the media as tokening a shift from Bush’s ‘bring ’em on’ cowboy shoot-out to a nuanced thinking-man’s war.” According to numerous reports, Kilcullen played a key role in the discussions in Kansas that led to the Manual, although whether he did any actual writing for it is not clear. McFate apparently was responsible for chapter 3 (“Intelligence in Counterinsurgency”). Clearly, the Manual was a slapdash effort, a paste job done in a hurry (two months). Chapter 3 is full of unattributed quotations lifted, sometimes with slight alterations, from past writers, including Victor Turner, a giant of McFate’s field.

This can come as little surprise to anyone who has sat and read the Manual. This ballyhooed publication is really a hunk of junk. Filled with bullet-pointed lists and PowerPoint-style graphics of the kind normally fed to impressionable youth and dim executives, the Manual is a compendium of banalities and occupation PR. One exemplary moment in this dreary tome comes on page 213: “Figure 6–1. Factors affecting security force deployment.” This image of a three-dimensional block built of cubes includes three axes (which are not labeled): one includes “Military,” “Police,” “Border Guards,” and “Corrections”; another, “National,” “Provincial,” “Town/Unit,” and “Individual”; and the third, “Assess,” “Organize,” “Build,” “Train,” “Equip,” and “Advise.” The relevant text reads, “Figure 6–1 illustrates the complex matrix of simultaneous development programs. Building a competent HN (‘Host Nation’) civilian infrastructure—including
civilian command and control systems—is critical for success in COIN.” Try to read a whole book of this kind of thing—or even a single chapter—without experiencing soul weariness over the time you have lost and will never get back. Yes, nation building is hard work. How can you succeed? Look, here’s a matrix! Is a captain or lieutenant supposed to copy this graphic and try to fill in all the boxes, explaining what she has done, say, to “Equip” the “Border Guards” at the “Provincial” level—or to “Assess” the “Corrections” apparatus at the “Town/Unit” level? Will she get an A in this course if she fills in the whole matrix? Is she supposed to feel sure that the “Host Nation civilian infrastructure” will be good to go? Can she go home now?

One could go on in this vein about the Manual’s contents at great length, but I see little point in doing so. The writing team needed to fill up the pages. The event of composing and publishing a field manual on COIN was itself the point. It meant that the army was giving its blessing to COIN—rather than to intensive bombing or to massive firefight in the streets of Iraq’s cities—as an approach to winning “the postwar.” Woe to any young officer in an occupation force who actually thinks consulting the Manual is going to be a help. What its existence can do is to give license to those wishing to employ an approach to foreign occupation that often mandates a greatly restricted use of deadly force—not an accomplishment to disdain, in terms of human lives lost and saved. Nonetheless, Price and other critics are surely correct to question whether anthropologists—and, by extension, academics and their institutions in general—should lend themselves to making invasion and occupation better, smarter, and more successful.

Several worthies blessed the Manual upon its publication by contributing either a foreword or an introduction. Petraeus and Lieutenant General James Amos (for the Marines) prepared a foreword, little more than one page long, as did Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl in more substantial form. Nagl, a 1988 West Point graduate who earned an MPhil in international relations from St. John’s College at Oxford two years later, commanded troops in the 1991 Gulf War and later returned to Oxford to get his DPhil. He inherited Krepinevich’s
mantle as the foremost advocate of COIN, authoring a well-known book, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (2002). Nagl served in combat again in Iraq in 2003–04. He did not serve in the same area of the country where Petraeus was in command: Nagl was in Khalidiyah, a central Iraqi city in al-Anbar province, while Petraeus ruled Mosul, in Kurdistan. Many later concluded that Petraeus had implemented COIN methods in Mosul, based on his own native shrewdness, before he ordered the construction of the *Manual* to lend institutional weight to those methods. Nagl writes admiringly that Petraeus presided in Mosul “with a firm but open hand,” and that local people took to calling him “Malik Daoud,” or King David. Nagl, gifted in managing his career, returned to the United States and became an assistant to Paul Wolfowitz and to Wolfowitz’s successor at the Pentagon, Gordon England.

Petraeus drafted Nagl, along with Kilcullen, to participate in the discussions leading to the *Manual*. It was the seminar-style conference, in February 2006, that stood out for Nagl as the high point of the drafting process. Nagl calls this “an unprecedented vetting session” at Fort Leavenworth, “which brought together journalists, human rights advocates, academics, and practitioners of counterinsurgency, [who] thoroughly revised the manual and dramatically improved it.” Nagl goes on, pressing the point, “Some military officers questioned the utility” of this exercise, but argues it was correct for the serious thinkers of the army and the Marine Corps to make themselves intellectually vulnerable to civilian do-gooders. It did not just improve the product. It proves what serious thinkers the COINdistas (a term used with some wryness by others in the military) are. “James Fallows, of the *Atlantic Monthly*”—notably, a definite opponent of the invasion—“commented at the end of the conference that he had never seen such an open transfer of ideas in any institution.” Nagl’s elation over imitating some of the forms of conventional academic life within the US military seems genuine, though he, like Kilcullen, managed to leave his fingerprints off the content of the *Manual*. Still, Nagl’s value as a mediagenic soldier
publicist was clearly noted by his superiors, since he became the primary public spokesperson for the Manual after its publication, making extensive rounds on radio and television (including The Daily Show). In an unusual move, after this media blitz Nagl returned to the occupation zone in 2006, working to train US-sponsored Iraqi and Afghan military personnel.

In the closing pages of their 2012 book, Arc of Empire: America’s Wars in Asia from the Philippines to Vietnam, the highly respected historians Michael Hunt and Steven Levine savage Nagl’s pretensions to sophistication, in a blistering passage on what they call the “tacit colonial mindset that goes with counterinsurgency.” To them, nation building is merely empire building by another name, and by necessity it is “ultimately not about the aspirations of the benighted subject peoples but about imposing the will of self-professed enlightened foreigners.” There is little reason to think Nagl would agree. But it also is true that Nagl, like Kilcullen, left the military and government service entirely as the Bush years ended (Nagl retired from the army in 2008). Nagl has not betrayed the hints of disillusionment with the approaches he himself championed that one may detect, if faintly and ambivalently, in Kilcullen’s recent writings. Yet they both seemed to play out their strings, in terms of their careers and in terms of showing how little COIN really could do to bring America a happy ending in Iraq or Afghanistan. The celebrity of Kilcullen and Nagl proved as fleeting as the appearance of COIN success on the ground.

Indeed, the careers of most of those closely attached to the COIN boom have lost much of their oomph. Kilcullen now lives by writing and by working (of course) as a private security consultant, and Nagl is headmaster at an upper-crust boys’ school in Pennsylvania. Nagl does keep his hand in policy debates, at least potentially, as a board member of the Center for a New American Security (CNAS), a think tank started in 2007, that bills itself as “pragmatic” and “fact-based”—an obvious dig at Wolfowitz-like fantasies. The CNAS has a politically broad, non-neocon cast of characters on its board; its current chief executive officer, and one of its founders, is
Michèle Flournoy, a leading Democratic Party national security executive (who recently declined to be nominated as secretary of defense by President Obama). McFate, in 2013–14, was Minerva Chair at the National War College. The Minerva Initiative, started in 2008, funded an array of social scientist faculty positions at military colleges. Nagl was a Minerva Chair at the Naval Academy in 2012–13. The Minerva Chair program’s funding expired after 2014; I cannot tell if McFate still has a position at the War College. Nothing need be said here of how Petraeus’s career ended (at least for now).

Yet there is one exception to this downward career arc. Sarah Sewall, whose name is known to relatively few, saw her star zoom higher and farther within the national security firmament than those of all these others, save Petraeus. Unlike the general, Sewall is still going strong. She has been a quiet meteor, if there is such a thing, since she was in college, and her streak continues some thirty years later. In her twenties, during the 1980s, Sewall joined the staff of US Senator George Mitchell, the Democrat who became Senate majority leader in 1989. She was Mitchell’s top foreign policy advisor, and from that key position in 1993 she moved into a sub-subcabinet post in the new administration of President Bill Clinton, as deputy assistant secretary of defense for peacekeeping and peace enforcement policy. In 1996, Sewall’s responsibilities were augmented, as US government assistance to refugees was merged into her division of the Pentagon, and she became the very first deputy assistant secretary of defense for peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance. She left this post in 1997 for academic life, gaining her DPhil in politics and international relations at St. Antony’s College, Oxford.

The 1990s were the birthing time of our current doctrine of humanitarian intervention, which laid important groundwork for the rise of COIN. This was the era of civil war in Bosnia, of Milosevic and the Kosovo Liberation Army, and ultimately of the US air war against Serbia. It was also the era of genocide in Rwanda and Bosnia, of democratic restoration and coup d’état in Haiti. Amid these crises, military occupation for purposes of preventing mass killing and providing for the victims of war was the focus for many liberals who were
attuned to foreign policy and who stopped short of identification with antiwar movements. This new policy thrust was a way for liberals to try to do something about the urgent humanitarian crises of the day. But it was also, in the Cold War's aftermath, a way for them to find relevancy in the power centers of the national security complex. In 2000, Sewall became the director of the National Security and Human Rights Program at Harvard's Kennedy School. She was doing the kinds of things a Democrat and former deputy assistant secretary of defense does when (starting in 2001, anyway) a Republican is in the White House. But at this specific historical juncture, Sewall also stood at the center of the gathering liberal-interventionist creed which, in institutional terms, was expressed by the collaboration between (largely) Democratic interventionists and the uniformed military. In 2006, Sewall took over as director for the Kennedy School's Carr Center for Human Rights Policy. In 2007, from this position, Sewall began the Mass Atrocity Response Operations (MARO) Project. MARO was a joint venture of the Carr Center and the US Army Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute. The idea behind MARO, simple and logical enough if the army were to be tasked with the job of stopping mass violence and providing assistance to its victims, was to build institutional knowledge and preparation for quick responses to such orders. Of course, whether the uniformed military ought to be the basic institution given such missions is another question. The MARO Project produced a "Military Planning Handbook" that was welcomed by some antigenocide activists, although others found it wanting; the philosopher Henry Theriault subjects it to a thorough, cogent, and fair critique in a 2011 article in the journal *Genocide Studies and Prevention*.

In order to understand the convergence of the idea of humanitarian military intervention with that of counterinsurgency as the 1990s gave way to the 2000s, one has to pause to consider the crucial role of the Carr Center. Endowed with money from a telecommunications mogul, it started up in 1999 and fast became a gathering place for Democratic power players who linked liberal idealism and academic prestige to military campaigns abroad. Its top responsibilities
are divided between a director and an executive director; the director heads the faculty, while the executive director appears to hold a higher, or at least broader, position of leadership. The first executive director of the Carr Center was Samantha Power, who held the position from either 1998 or 1999 (the year when she got her JD from Harvard Law School) until 2002. Power first became well known as the author of “A Problem from Hell” (2002), a major journalistic work on the history of genocide. She was a stern critic of Bush’s Iraq War—although, just to be clear, it seems that Power refrained from explicitly opposing the invasion itself, offering somewhat awkward statements on the subject in 2003, ones characteristic of liberals who detested Bush but wished to avoid saying things that would render them unfit for future high position in Washington. In the case of a liberal interventionist like Power, an additional factor should have generated genuine ambivalence: she undoubtedly saw the difficulty in resisting the looming invasion intellectually in light of the arguments she had made for armed intervention in other cases (intervention versus invasion being largely a matter of scale), while she just as clearly must have understood that Bush had an agenda different from hers. Power called for an altruistic assertion of American supremacy of arms, one less stained with imperial pretension and the pursuit of gross national interest. The 9/11 attacks on America did little to alter her doctrine, developed in the 1990s. Power then attached herself to US Senator Barack Obama, working on his Washington staff, and won a National Security Council staff role in his presidential administration. Since 2013, Power has been the US ambassador to the United Nations, the youngest ever to hold the office. Many see her—although I am not sure how strong the evidence is—as having played a pivotal role in persuading Obama to bomb Libya in 2011, thereby helping Libyans to overthrow their longtime ruler, Mu’ammar Gadhafi.

The other Carr Center heavyweight during its early years was its first director, the regrettable Michael Ignatieff. Less careful than Power, and more affected by 9/11, Ignatieff is a Canadian litterateur from a highly placed Liberal Party family. Grown for an elite
academic career, which he began after earning a PhD in history at Harvard in the 1970s, Ignatieff departed this career track in the 1980s to become a public intellectual with a broad audience. By 2000, he managed to get the best of both worlds by taking his place at the Carr Center. His special concern, growing out of the experiences of the 1990s, was establishing an intellectual and political foundation for humanitarian interventions. The al-Qaeda attacks pushed this project into overdrive. By 2003, Ignatieff garnered wide attention with pieces he wrote for US newspapers expressly advocating imperialism, to be led by the United States with assistance from other, primarily English-speaking, forces. Ignatieff offered himself as a liberal counterpart to other British and Canadian enthusiasts of US empire, such as Niall Ferguson and Max Boot, who associated themselves with the center-right, not the center-left. In 2003, Ignatieff and Sewall, through the Carr Center, participated in planning sessions for the invasion and postwar occupation of Iraq with US military officials. Their view was that they were helping to minimize civilian deaths in the coming war. Ignatieff also devoted some energy, in his own “dark side” manifesto, *The Lesser Evil* (2004), to splitting hairs over which rough interrogation methods were and were not really, truly, torture. In 2005, Ignatieff left the Carr Center—replaced by Sewall, his antithesis in terms of hunger for the limelight—and returned to his native land for a new career in politics. He won a seat as a Liberal member of parliament, and within four years he had wrested control of the foundering Liberals from his rivals. He then led the Liberal Party, in 2011, to the worst election defeat in its history, after which the Liberals dropped to the third position in the Commons, relinquishing the role of Official Opposition (a situation recently reversed under new Liberal leadership). Ignatieff had campaigned on a pledge to continue Canada’s role in the occupation of Afghanistan, which the ruling premier, Conservative Stephen Harper, wished to wind down. Ignatieff lost his own seat, and subsequently reappeared as a Kennedy School faculty member. He now holds the Edward R. Murrow Chair in Practice of Politics and the Press.
In 2007, Ignatieff offered a pseudo-apology, in the *New York Times*, for his support of the Iraq invasion. He did not seem to understand what he should have been apologizing for. He reflects, “Among intellectuals, judgment is about generalizing…particular facts as instances of some big idea,” but, “in politics, everything is what it is and not another thing. Specifics matter more than generalities. Theory gets in the way.” I have no idea why he consigns international affairs to the realm of “politics.” Was the problem of those who supported the invasion that they were not “political” enough? What can he possibly mean? And why does he think that “intellectuals” in general do not understand that “everything is what it is and not another thing”? But put all of that aside. The basic problem, in Ignatieff’s mind, is that his “big idea” (liberal imperialism) blinded him to the tricky realities of implementing it successfully in Iraq. If only his theories had not been so grand! If only reality had not been so…real.

Sewall was left to pick up the pieces at the Carr Center, where she stayed until 2009. Since that time it has moved more emphatically toward advocacy of human rights in nonmilitary terms. From 2010 to 2015, the executive director was Charlie Clements, a physician and previously the president of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. The director is Douglas Johnson, who was the longtime head of the Center for Victims of Torture, based in Minnesota. They are a pretty far distance from “realists”—or were they “idealists”?—like Ignatieff and Power. These changes were almost enough to make one think someone at the Carr Center felt it needed to do penance. But, during the Bush years, the Carr Center played a crucial role in blessing invasion and occupation with the aura of liberal idealism, and in providing smooth institutional passage between liberal academia and the national security complex at high levels. Sewall herself illustrated this passage brilliantly, not only in terms of where she landed in the Obama administration but, more powerfully, in her key role as a little-noticed broker and gatekeeper for many others who wished to negotiate such a passage. Sewall had one of the very top positions on Obama’s presidential transition team during the months between
November 2008 and January 2009. She headed the National Security Agency Review for the transition. This means that she oversaw the sifting and vetting of all appointees in all national security agencies: Defense, State, Homeland Security, CIA, and others. Sewall sat above Michèle Flournoy, Tom Donilon (who later became Obama’s national security adviser), and John Brennan (who now heads the CIA), as well as other notables, on the transition team organizational chart. For a Washington insider, this was a true career high. Still, she stayed out of the first-term administration, instead returning to the Kennedy School, where she was a senior lecturer after stepping down from the Carr Center directorship. She was Minerva Chair at the Naval War College in 2012, but in 2014 she returned to the civilian government, becoming undersecretary of state for civilian security, democracy, and human rights—her present job. (She is also the government’s special coordinator for Tibetan issues.) One expects that, in another Democratic administration, she would be in line to move up a level, to the undersecretary rank either at State or Defense.

In 2007, when the Chicago edition of the Counterinsurgency Field Manual came out, by far its most substantial accompaniment was the introduction that Sewall wrote for the occasion. This is certainly Sewall’s best-known piece of writing, and in it she joins, far more directly than any of the other COIN boosters, the human rights issues raised by COIN doctrine’s history and operational realities. Displaying a good grasp of the contemporary COIN conversation, Sewall makes the most substantive and sustained of efforts to interpret and defend the COIN approach to the civilian academic intelligentsia as a humane means of waging war. In the process, she lays bare some of the characteristic blind spots and contradictions of COIN.

Sewall opens by terming the Manual “radical,” signaling its sharp departure from traditional American military thinking with its emphasis on massive firepower. “Those who fail to see the manual as radical,” she writes, in the first of several swipes at fatuous antimilitary liberals, “probably don’t understand it, or at least understand
what it’s up against.” The COINdistas have always seen themselves swimming against the powerful tide of military convention, and Sewall urges us to admire their bravery. She asserts that “this field manual is not simply a refinement on the margins of US practice; given where the military has been since Vietnam, it is paradigm shattering.”

The radicalism of the Manual inheres in its advocacy of carefully controlled violence. “The manual…emphasizes the value of using the minimum necessary force rather than the maximum force permissible,” Sewall writes. Force protection, which leads to great garrisons and maximum violence in response to threats, simply is not the top priority; winning the (post)war is. This means increasing the risk to US soldiers and marines, or at least appearing to. “Today’s enemy insurgent’s tactics and strategy have forced additional risk upon the American Soldier and Marine,” as Sewall puts it. COIN believers have faith that getting out of fortified bases, mingling with those under occupation authority, and making oneself vulnerable to the tactics of asymmetric warfare will, in the end, make US servicemen safer by winning “the people” to their side. But it will mean giving up the short-term, situational protections of fortifications, armored personnel carriers, and covering airstrikes. As Sewall puts it, using conventional COIN language, “The field manual directs US forces to make securing the civilian, rather than destroying the enemy, their top priority….Civilians must be separated from insurgents to insulate them from insurgent pressure and to deny the insurgent ‘fish’ the cover of the civilian ‘sea.’”

These refrains, staples of COIN writing since the 1960s, are meant to signal an awareness of revolutionary strategy, strategy that can be thwarted by denying the descendants of Mao their “sea”—the people. It may seem strange to think of today’s Salafi fighters as Maoists. Yet Sewall retains an earlier era’s designation of insurgent enemies as “revolutionaries,” whereas many post-9/11 COIN advocates prefer not to honor the world’s violent jihadists with such a romantic and politically freighted name, instead disdaining them as enemies with incoherent, highly provincial, or absurdly reactionary aims. Whether the enemy is a revolutionary or not, the people “must
be separated from insurgents.” This will prove the good intentions of the occupiers, it will prevent the insurgents from winning further recruits, and it will set up the insurgents for the kill, with the likelihood of collateral damage greatly lessened. As in the 1960s, Sewall’s vision of counterinsurgency can only work if the insurgents and “the people” can be distinguished from one another; now, just as then, military conquest and occupation are described as acts of protection. The apolitical status of “the people,” another Kennedy-era throwback, also is clear in Sewall’s rendering of the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan. “The population waits to be convinced. Who will help them more, hurt them less, stay the longest, earn their trust?” Dig them a well, build them a school.

Sewall is forthright, just as McFate is in describing anthropology’s imperialist heritage, in identifying COIN knowledge’s descent from the work of imperial pacification warfare. Today’s COIN “is based on principles learned during Britain’s early period of imperial policing and relearned during responses to twentieth-century independence struggles in Malaya and Kenya. It incorporates insights from French counterinsurgency guru David Galula.” (Galula was very hot back in the 1960s, when his writings were translated into English.) Why anyone would wish to take “principles” from the Mau Mau War in Kenya or the failed French wars in Indochina and Algeria, I cannot say. Moral qualms aside, you might want to take your warfighting lessons from winners, not from losers. Of these two problems with the imperial roots of COIN knowledge—moral atrociousness and military failure—Sewall, as a certified human rights authority, shows concern exclusively with the first. She acknowledges the queasiness her audience may justifiably feel about borrowing methods from the Kenyan or Algerian conflicts, and seeks to allay such moral concerns. She never notes that COIN, if it really was tried by the British and French in those wars, did not succeed.

Pushing back preemptively against critics who know something of this late-imperial background, Sewall writes that “history provides plenty of reason to doubt contemporary claims about a kinder and gentler counterinsurgency.” She concedes, “Great Britain sanctioned
tactics that would not pass moral muster today. That repertoire included using food as a weapon of population control (starvation), forcibly relocating civilians (ethnic cleansing), and torture.” She also sees fit to mention that in the Vietnam War, “the United States spoke of winning hearts and minds even as it carpet bombed rural areas and rained napalm on village streets.” She implies that COIN was used by government forces, supplied and sometimes trained by the US military, in El Salvador in the 1980s; she mentions the death squads in that country. Having squarely faced this repulsive history, Sewall then simply asserts that current COIN thinking has left behind such bad practices, while keeping the wholesome ones. “The COIN field manual may draw upon colonial teachings and the US Marines’ code of conduct for occupying Latin American nations,” she writes, “but its implicit and explicit standards of behavior have evolved.”

Is this all that needs saying? Not really, as Sewall seems to be aware, since she makes additional efforts to dispel moral objections to occupation and counterinsurgency. At some moments, she comes close to expressing disturbing truths about such ways of making war. “Some critics,” she writes in an arresting passage, “may reject the very notion that revolutionary change should be suppressed, a larger argument this essay will not address. They may warn against counterinsurgency as a genre of war because they believe it inexorably descends into depravity. Such logic is appealing, but only rewards insurgents’ intolerable behavior. If the decision to go to war is ‘just,’ enemy misconduct cannot make it morally impermissible to fight it.” This is a little hard to follow; there is a lot packed into it. Why does Sewall write that the “logic” of the argument that COIN “inexorably descends into depravity” is “appealing”? That “logic” would seem at odds with the entire contemporary COIN project. Perhaps she means that it is appealing to simpletons or to the uninformed. Why does she put quotation marks around the word “just”? Is it because war is never truly just, but only seems just to some? That would make little sense, since Sewall is surely no pacifist. (Indeed, she writes at another point, “Not everyone accepts the manual’s underlying premise—the legitimacy of counterinsurgency, or even of
war itself. For the pacifist, even ‘perfect’ doctrine enables immoral purpose. But most of us, however reluctantly, accept war as necessary.” You see: only a pacifist could oppose such a war.) As far as I can tell, Sewall is adding a dollop of irony to the idea of just war here in order to signal to an academic audience, which she may presume is reflexively antiwar, that she is sophisticated enough not to buy easy arguments that this or that war is just.

Most important is Sewall’s reiteration of the completely standard COIN talking point that when occupation forces do use violence against civilians, it is the enemy’s fault. The “insurgents’ intolerable behavior”—hiding among the population from which they have emerged, employing suicide bombings (the indictment does not vary, from Iraq to Israel/Palestine and beyond)—has spurred the use of force that kills noncombatants, which COIN discourse renders almost a mechanistic, irresistible, automatic response, not a matter of choice at all. In another striking passage, Sewall states, “Counterinsurgency can bring out the worst in the best regular armies. Even when COIN forces explicitly reject insurgent tactics, they often come to imitate them. In particular, the insurgents’ invisibility often tempts counterinsurgents to erase the all-important distinctions between combatants and the noncombatants.” The “insurgents’ invisibility,” i.e., their resemblance to the general population, makes them responsible for violence by the occupation force.

Apparently the “all-important distinctions between combatants and the noncombatants” are not so easy to make. Could it be that this is not simply a question of insurgent perfidy—that COIN “can bring out the worst” not just because of deception and confusion but because occupiers cannot really make the distinction between militants and bystanders that today’s COIN discourse insists upon? But this is the frontier that Sewall’s thinking does not cross. No insurgency worth the name will exist for long without a base of support—both passive and active and covering a wide spectrum of positions—within the local population. Occupation forces on the ground tend to realize this after not very long. This is the essential reason why counterinsurgency warfare, historically, has tended to become war against
entire populations, or at least substantial segments of them. Draining a sea is a far more disruptive, violent process than COIN promoters like to admit.

After scrutinizing the somewhat troubled text that Sewall provides, it comes as a relief to consider the work of the person who, more than anybody else, can be considered the *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*’s author. This is Conrad Crane, who was tasked by David Petraeus with pulling the *Manual* together in short order. Crane did not do himself much credit with the *Manual* itself, particularly in light of the rampant plagiarism in at least some sections that he farmed out to people like McFate. Nonetheless, it is not surprising that Petraeus turned to Crane in this endeavor. Crane represents yet another type of military intellectual—one with genuine, unquestionable academic training. Crane earned a PhD in history at Stanford University, his advanced schooling funded by the army, and after that he became a history professor at West Point. This is the gold-standard method of producing a military officer with intellectual legitimacy: send him to a real university to get an advanced degree in a recognized discipline, instead of building customized training at a military institution or gaining a degree from a public policy school with, let us say, uneven academic standards. Crane represents the best the US military can do in terms of building intellectual capital.

Crane’s dissertation was revised and published as a book, * Bombs, Cities, and Civilians: American Airpower Strategy in World War II* (1993), with the University Press of Kansas, the foremost publisher of US military history among American university presses. Crane argues that US air warfare during World War II was more committed, both in doctrine and in practice, to precision bombing and the avoidance of civilian suffering than critics, such as Michael Sherry in his book *The Rise of American Airpower* (1987), have asserted. The evidence Crane presents is actually a good deal more ambiguous than his argument, as he states it in the broadest terms, suggests. Nonetheless, fellow historians of US airpower within the US military welcomed Crane’s work as an effective rejoinder to
Sherry and his ilk. Although I do not think Crane makes his case as strongly as some of his admirers believe he does, his work is sober, logically presented, and detailed. In other words, it is a real piece of scholarship. This is the way much of the best American military history proceeds: the methods are basically sound, the precise arguments may vary, and the theme is vindication. Despite the book’s limitations, the contrast between this historical work and the shabby faux scholarship generated in most of the shadow university world is sharp and revealing.

Crane lent his prestige to the COIN project, and one can regret it, but certainly one cannot be surprised. He took on the assignment that Petraeus, apparently his West Point classmate, handed him. Intriguingly, in a blog post from 2014 at a site called warontherocks.com, Crane—who is retired from military service but continues to work at the Army War College—distances himself from the whole COIN fad. He writes, “I am often asked if I am a so-called ‘COINdista’….When I reply that I am not, the question then comes whether I consider myself a ‘COINtra,’ someone who believes that COIN…was overemphasized and a distraction from more important conventional capabilities.” Crane takes up a centrist position in the debate, answering, “I consider myself ‘COINfused,’” going on to say that he wishes “to combine the best of both schools.” Yet this “best practices” rhetorical move, so unexceptionable in either a military or a public policy environment, merely softens the blow against COIN from the Manual’s own organizer. Consider what this means. The Field Manual is Crane’s handiwork, but he will not advocate for its viewpoint. He summarizes the lessons of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars for America as “just because you can do counterinsurgency does not mean that you should, but just because you say that you are executing counterinsurgency does not mean that you are.” Crane is also critical of the Human Terrain System. His major point on this score is that anthropologists like McFate know less about local cultures than military officers do. While Crane commends McFate’s activities as patriotic, his comment, “People are not terrain,” carries a definite cutting edge.
By positioning himself as a defender of the traditional military emphasis on the utility of “overwhelming conventional capabilities,” Crane signals that the COIN vogue has passed, even though he assures us that COIN’s most valuable ideas “have now permeated all American doctrine.” This is about as close as we have come to getting an after-action report on the actual success or failure of COIN in America’s recent wars. The enthusiasm has passed; the Comedy Central appearances fade in memory. Fred Kaplan’s version, *The Insurgents,* certainly fails to provide a serious accounting. Most of the book reads like a cheerleading tale of institutional heroism; the tone suddenly shifts to one of criticism at the end. This strange narrative turn likely reflects the timeline of the book’s composition—it was released in 2013—with the author making late adjustments as the COIN balloon deflated. The COIN mania of the past decade served to reveal to public view an institutional bulk that generally has been seen only dimly, if at all, by most. The shadow university world came into light, and now it has retreated back into its normal mist of occlusion. But it is still there.