



## Widening the Debate on COIN

From Fester at Newshoggers ([Closing the Overton Window on COIN](#)):

The Overton window is closed in foreign policy. The range of acceptable opinions is from the Kagan clan of neo-cons to somewhat liberalish Center for New American Security on the sort of left. Brookings, CAP, Heritage, AEI all assume American hegemony is supreme and should be maintained in an unchallenged state through spending twice the global average on defense despite the fact that the current opponents that the US is engaged in combat with have budgets that are not even rounding errors in a single service's sub-budget. The major debate is on methods and tactics, not goals and strategies.

He means CNAS rather than CAP in the above post. But he's basically right, at least as far as counter-insurgency and defense policy more broadly. He could have also added the Council on Foreign Relations to his list.

He also links to [Who are the experts advising our generals? We know what they'll say](#) on the "outside" experts brought in to advise on Afghanistan policy. I put "outside" in quotes because... well, all of the people on that list have long been co-opted, even the Democrats there were aggressively courted by the Bush Administration. The list includes:

1. [Stephen Biddle](#), Council on Foreign Relations (Author of the classic *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle*)
2. [Anthony Cordesman](#), Center for Strategic and International Studies
3. [Catherine Dale](#), Congressional Research Service
4. Etienne de Durand, director of the Center for Strategic Studies at the Institut Francais des Relations Internationales (no bio found)
5. [Andrew Exum](#), a former Army Ranger, counterinsurgency expert, and blogger at the Center for a New American Security
6. [Fred Kagan](#), American Enterprise Institute
7. [Kimberly Kagan](#), Institute for the Study of War
8. Whitney Kassel, Office of the Secretary of Defense (no bio found, possible author of [these](#) and [these](#) articles)
9. [Terry Kelly](#), senior researcher at the RAND Corporation
10. [Luis Peral](#), European Union's Institute for Strategic Studies
11. Lt. Col. Aaron Prupas, USAF officer at Centcom (USAF Academy, Class of 1987; no bio found)
12. [Jeremy Shapiro](#), civil-military relations analyst at the Brookings Institution

There are a couple of issues to raise, however, about the issue of widening the debate. First of all, the people who were brought in on the Afghanistan review are, with only a couple of exceptions, genuinely knowledgeable and insightful people. I have particular respect of Cordesman and Biddle, but Dale and Shapiro are sharp as tacks as well. And Exum is an original thinker — though too narrow in his understanding of military operations for my tastes. I know the others — and their work — less well, but see few obvious clunkers on the list.

Second, it is not just critics of a quasi-imperial posture who are off the list, but also the variety of scorched-earth nutters who also write on these issues like Victor Davis Hanson and Ralph Peters. The point is, the idea was not to silence “liberals,” but rather to assure a certain commonality of perspectives that would reinforce the policy preferences of the Obama Administration and the military doctrine of the Gates DoD. There are likely a number of folks on the right who see the exclusion of take-no-prisoners advocates in favor of “population security” COIN theorists as an example of the Obama Administration’s liberal bias. Anyway, long story short, this list reflects a desire to get advice to implement an existing consensus in the Obama Administration, so critics from both left and right were excluded.

Third, they did sort of broaden the debate... I mean, they could have included Mike O’Hanlon, John Nagl, David Kilcullen, and some of other core members of the COIN mafia.

Fourth, it behooves those of us who would like to see the debate transformed to actually include a list of potential alternate experts. With all due respect to Matt Yglesias ([Politico Only Knows Conservative Experts](#)), who often writes about how progressives are often labeled as something other than “serious,” he’s not on the list. He’s smart, but if I were putting together a list of people I’d like to see advising McChrystal, he wouldn’t be on it. But here is who I would like to see on it, along with a representative example of their arguments:

1. Andrew Bacevich ([The Petraeus Doctrine](#));
2. Chris Preble ([The Power Problem: How American Military Dominance Makes Us Less Safe, Less Prosperous and Less Free](#))
3. John Mueller ([How Dangerous Are the Taliban?](#))
4. Mike Mazarr ([The Folly of ‘Asymmetric War’](#))
5. Col. Gian Gentile ([Our COIN doctrine removes the enemy from the essence of war](#))
6. And even... if I may... little old me ([Afghanistan is Irrelevant](#))

At the very least... McChrystal would benefit from having some members of this group formally “red team” his evolving strategy... before the Taliban does.