
THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Playing to Our Strengths—and Why COIN Doesn't

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A recent [editorial](#) in the *Boston Globe* noted with some glee that the Obama administration strategy document released last week included the “acknowledgement that America's brief and unhappy foray into counterinsurgency operations has come to an end.” The *Globe* editorialists conclude “Given the checkered history of counterinsurgency, and its cost in lives and money, its demise is hardly unwelcome. Even better to read of it in the very document that hopes to guide how the United States conducts wars the next time around.”

As a COIN skeptic from well before the publication of FM 3-24 (when COIN was called nation building), I am inclined to claim some vindication. Often with Justin Logan in the lead, I have probably written more about this subject than any other (including [here](#) and [here](#)). More broadly, Cato has been a hospitable venue for skeptical views of nation building as a cure for terrorism, including [these two](#) fine papers that explained why we didn't need to repair/reconstruct weak or failing states in order to defeat al-Qaeda, and [this paper](#) by Jeffrey Record on why COIN/nation building was inconsistent with America's strategic culture and therefore likely to fail.

But I expect that some COIN advocates will push back, and a few quite vociferously. Some might admit that, yes, Afghanistan has been an unholy

mess, but we need to give it more time. The public has soured on the war there and is now turning against the dominant strategy, COIN, but those attitudes, they will say, could be turned around with concerted presidential leadership. And then they will launch into their full-throated defense of COIN, which might go something like this:

COIN is still useful in particular situations, especially when the operations are in support of a credible local partner, when we are able and willing to apply the necessary resources to have a reasonable chance of success, and when we are prepared to remain for the long haul. And once we have committed to the COIN mission, we must ensure that we execute the mission properly, as spelled out in FM 3-24, which means that the troops must accept greater risk in order to minimize civilian casualties.

My response, and I think that of other COIN skeptics, is that those key ingredients are almost never in place, hence COIN almost never works.

—If there were "a credible local partner," there likely wouldn't be an insurgency in the first place. Insurgencies come about and grow in strength because the government they are rising up against is not serving the best interests of some segment of the population.

—Applying "necessary resources" means, in practice, a massive number of foreign troops and vast sums of money, far more even than most COIN advocates admit in public. They are especially loathe to do so when those resources are desperately needed at home. (Equally troubling is the application of a massive, costly, long-term effort *in one place* when those same resources could be applied in pursuit of different—or even the same—national security priorities elsewhere.)

—Remaining in country "for the long haul" means decades, not years, another bridge too far for most Americans. We are not inclined to lord over others for decades or longer as past empires did.

—Executing COIN tactics "properly" means limiting the use of force such that you only kill the bad guys but never kill the good guys or the indifferent neutrals. One unfortunate accident, involving the inadvertent killing of innocent bystanders (who the insurgents will very cynically shield behind) can undermine weeks or months of effort in building trust. We are foreigners in their country, and the locals will be disinclined to give us the benefit of the doubt, or to trust in our good intentions. Though I admire and respect the professionalism and sacrifice of our men and women in uniform, I don't think it realistic to expect them to be perfect.

Afghanistan, by itself, does not prove that COIN can't work. COIN might be the appropriate strategy in other cases or other places. But a football analogy is relevant here. Think of the upcoming AFC Championship Game between the New England Patriots and the Baltimore Ravens. A team with two-time MVP Tom Brady at quarterback doesn't choose to pound the ball into the teeth of a run-stopping defense like Baltimore's, especially when New England's running backs are pretty average by NFL standards. Meanwhile, the Ravens' Ray Rice is one of the premier backs in the league, so we can expect the Ravens to favor the ground game, run time off the clock and keep Brady on the sidelines. In other words, each team is likely play to its strengths.

COIN skeptics said that Team USA should do the same. Although the COIN advocates claimed that there was no viable alternative, there was more than one way to win the game in Afghanistan, and we should play to our strengths. Our political culture and available resources, combined with the facts on the ground, advise us to avoid open-ended nation-building missions generally, not just in Afghanistan. That means an air game (including air power from the sea), not a ground game.

I am pleased that the administration's strategy seems to reflect these lessons. We'll see, perhaps as early as next week, if their budget does as well.