

Book Reviews

The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One. By David Kilcullen. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 246 pages. \$27.95. Reviewed by Anthony James Joes, Professor of Political Science at Saint Joseph's University.

To categorize David Kilcullen's resume as impressive would be hopelessly inadequate. He has been an officer in the Australian infantry for 25 years, chief counterterrorism strategist for the US State Department, senior counterinsurgency adviser to General David Petraeus during the 2007 surge, and a participant in the writing of the irregular warfare and counterterrorism sections of the Quadrennial Defense Review in 2005.

His new book, *The Accidental Guerrilla*, consists of five main sections. The first lays out the author's conceptual framework, including different models for understanding the present Islamist/terrorist situation (for example, "globalization backlash" and "Islamic civil war"). In this context Kilcullen sees the influence of groups such as al Qaeda as a result of globalization, which challenges and indeed threatens traditional societies. The second part largely deals with his personal experiences in Afghanistan during 2006-2008 (in which he observes that no one will ever know if or how the Coalition would have succeeded in Afghanistan because the Iraq conflict drew so much attention away from that earlier effort). The third section focuses on events in Iraq during the 2007 surge. The fourth discusses some other conflicts—East Timor (where the Australians were on the wrong side), Thailand, and Pakistan—looking for similarities and differences with Iraq and Afghanistan. The last section draws out some of the implications of the previous chapters and offers suggestions for how western democracies can more effectively deal with global terrorism.

Kilcullen's "basic assumption is that insurgency is a mass social phenomenon, that the enemy rides and manipulates a social wave consisting of genuine popular grievances, and that dealing with this broader social and political dynamic while gaining time for targeted reforms to work, by applying a series of tailored, full-spectrum security measures is the most promising path to ultimately resolve the problem." Thus he aligns himself with the (apparently) dominant view within the US military. But probably the heart of the book is Kilcullen's identification of "the existence of an accidental guerrilla syndrome, whereby transnational extremists infect an existing societal problem, and then through a process of contagion spread instability and violence into the broader society. This provokes an intervention (from the national government or the international community) which then alienates traditional societies, causing them to close ranks and to lash out in an immune rejection response that exacerbates violence, alienates social groups from the government and from each other, and further strengthens the hand of extremists." In effect, "accidental guerrillas" are fighting against outside intervention (however "outside" is defined) rather than in favor of some Islamic extremist ideology. One needs to handle this idea carefully. Most insurgencies have actually been

civil wars, as in the Philippines, Malaya, French Algeria, French Vietnam, Portuguese Africa, and Northern Ireland, as well as Iraq and Afghanistan.

Kilcullen cites a new term, hybrid warfare, essentially a combination of guerrilla warfare and terrorism. To counter this supposedly new type, the counter-insurgent state and its allies need to build up its military and economic capacities while dealing with insurgency, terrorism, and civil war. But these elements were all present in Vietnam (both French and South) and in Greece and the Philippines after 1945. Indeed, protracted conflicts that combined insurgency and terrorism received central coordination and assistance from outside the target country. These conflicts provoked international cooperation and often intervention, which characterized almost the entire Cold War. Recall, for instance, that during the late 1940s, Communist or Communist-influenced insurgencies raged simultaneously in the Philippines, China, Greece, Indonesia, Malaya, and Vietnam, among other places, all paying more than mere lip service to a universalistic ideology that aspired to the forcible imposition of a new world order.

Kilcullen does not analyze those conflicts. These and other omissions call attention to the fact that the reference section of his book presents very few quotations from or even citations of the counterinsurgency literature of the past 50 years, a position paradoxical but not unusual for a counterinsurgency adviser to the United States government. The author clearly understands the value of comparative analysis, but the cases he uses to support his general argument are drawn from the same recent time period, and are ones with which he has been personally involved, conditions that can limit the value of analysis. What Kilcullen wants to see done in Iraq and Afghanistan was in fact done by the United States in Greece, the Philippines, and El Salvador; these cases, however, are not analyzed or even mentioned.

In spite of this reluctance to identify or criticize much of the work that has gone before, Kilcullen nevertheless develops a number of prescriptions that are in accord with the prevailing literature. He insists that counterinsurgents need to display “virtue, moral authority, and credibility” (what some other authors have called “rectitude”). Among his other principal conclusions are that “a low-profile civilian presence will always [surely not always?] be preferable to a military presence, and where a military presence is essential it should be as stealthy and unobtrusive as possible;” that “wherever possible our interests will be best served by working with, and through, a local partner;” that “political reform and development is the hard core of any counterinsurgency strategy;” and most fundamentally, that “effective counterinsurgency provides human security to the population, where they live, 24 hours a day. This, not destroying the enemy, is the central task.” Amen to all these.

Thus, the relative narrowness of his comparative method notwithstanding, Kilcullen’s powerful intelligence, common sense, broad experience, patent sincerity, and clear writing have all combined to produce a book that deserves to be read by anybody with a serious concern about the nature of the conflicts looming in the years ahead.