

# A Strategy of Tactics: Population-centric COIN and the Army

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Population-centric counterinsurgency (COIN) has become the American Army's new way of war. The principles and ideas that emerged out of the Army's counterinsurgency field manual (FM), FM 3-24, published in late 2006, have become transcendent. The field manual has moved beyond simple Army doctrine for countering insurgencies to become the defining characteristic of the Army's new way of war. In the American Army today, everyone is a counterinsurgent. It is easy to find examples of FM 3-24's permeating effect in other Army doctrinal manuals such as FM 3-0, *Operations*, and FM 3-07, *Stability Operations*. Lieutenant General William B. Caldwell, IV, the American Army general charged with writing the Army's doctrine, recently stated:

The future is not one of major battles and engagements fought by armies on battlefields devoid of population; instead, the course of conflict will be decided by forces operating among the people of the world. Here, the margin of victory will be measured in far different terms than the wars of our past. The allegiance, trust, and confidence of populations will be the final arbiters of success.<sup>1</sup>

The idea of populations as the prize in war, that they are the focus, is drawn directly from the pages of FM 3-24.<sup>2</sup>

In a sense, population-centric counterinsurgency has perverted a better way of American war which has primarily been one of improvisation and practicality. Over the course of American history there have been strategic shifts in terms of the threats and enemies that the United States had faced. With each of these shifts came a different approach, or way, to fighting wars or preparing for them in peacetime. For example, in the American

Civil War, General Ulysses S. Grant carried out a strategy of exhausting the southern armies through large-scale combat. A quarter of a century later in the Philippines, the American Army improvised and adapted to fight and ultimately defeat an insurgency against the US colonial government. As historian Brian Linn has shown in criticism of Russell Weigley's classic *The American Way of War*, the US military's approach has not been an ideological one of only wanting to fight wars consisting of big battles. A close reading of Linn's work shows that the true American way of war has been one of adaptation and flexibility, and not a rigid ideological attachment to seeking out the next Napoleonic battle of Austerlitz.<sup>3</sup>

Regrettably, the American Army's new way of war, otherwise called population-centric counterinsurgency, has become the only operational tool in the Army's repertoire to deal with problems of insurgency and instability throughout the world. Population-centric COIN may be a reasonable operational method to use in certain circumstances, but it is not a strategy. There are flaws and limitations that need to be exposed and considered.

### *A Military Methodology*

Population-centric counterinsurgency is a military operation, a method, nothing more and nothing less. Its ideas and rules of tactics and operations should be familiar to anyone who has studied or thought about various approaches to COIN. They are:

- Populations are always the focus, the center of gravity, and they have to be protected.
- The enemy insurgent as a rule cannot be as important or given the same level of emphasis as the population.
- Population-centric COIN requires patience on the part of the American people.
- It demands a certain tactical approach of dispersion into small outposts to live amongst the people to win their hearts and minds; this has become the concept of clear, hold, and build.
- Population-centric counterinsurgency equals nation-building, and it requires a major investment in time to be successful.
- Its historical model of success is the British in Malaya.

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- Its supreme historical failure is the United States' involvement in Vietnam.
- Its current narrative is that the techniques of population-centric counterinsurgency practiced by several additional combat brigades as part of the Surge of forces in Iraq produced success after February 2007.
- Its historical “how-to” text is *Counterinsurgency Warfare* by a French Army officer who fought in Algeria, David Galula.
- Its current set of rules are prescribed in FM 3-24. As the rules dictate, an Army unit must learn and adapt to improved population-centric tactics and operations; the unit cannot learn and adapt other methods in place of population-centric counterinsurgency.

Good strategy, however, demands the consideration of alternatives, yet the American Army's fixation on population-centric COIN precludes choice. We may have become adept at appearing to apply Galula's principles in Iraq and Afghanistan, but we are not good strategists. Strategy is about choice, options, and the wisest use of resources in war to achieve policy objectives. Yet in the American Army's new way of war, tactics—that is, the carrying out of the “way”—have utterly eclipsed strategy.

Nation-building using population-centric COIN as its centerpiece should be viewed as an operation. It should not be viewed as strategy, or even policy for that matter. But what is occurring now in Afghanistan, for example, at least for the American Army, is a “strategy of tactics.” If strategy calls for nation-building as an operational method to achieve policy objectives, and it is resourced correctly, then the population-centric approach might make sense. But because the United States has “principilized” population-centric COIN into the only way of doing any kind of counterinsurgency, it dictates strategy.

### ***Tactical Orientation***

Ironically, the new approach has inverted political scientist Andrew Krepinevich's damning criticism of the American Army in his hugely influential but deeply flawed 1986 book, *The Army in Vietnam*. Krepinevich's strategy of tactics argument for Vietnam was that the American Army was so conventionally minded and hidebound that it was unable to see a better way of population-centric COIN.<sup>4</sup> Now the American Army has done the inverse. The Army is so tactically oriented toward population-centric counterinsurgency that it cannot think of doing anything else. General Stanley McChrystal's recently released command guidance to forces in Afghanistan employs all of the dictums of population-centric counterinsurgency and confirms this strategy of tactics. His statement that success in

Afghanistan will not be determined by the number of enemy killed but by the “shielding” of the civilian population could have easily come out of the pages of FM 3-24, or commander’s talking points during the Iraq Surge.<sup>5</sup>

These population-centric COIN principles have been turned into immutable rules that are dictating strategy in Afghanistan and having a powerful shaping effect on reorganizing the American Army. A few months ago, when asked about the way ahead for the American military in Afghanistan and how Iraq was comparable to Afghanistan, General David Petraeus acknowledged that the two were very different. But the thing to remember, according to General Petraeus, was that the principles of COIN that the Army has learned in Iraq over the past couple of years are applicable to Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup>

Those principles belong to the population-centric COIN methodology. If we accept that the principles are applicable, then we have already chosen the way ahead in Afghanistan, which is population-centric nation-building requiring large numbers of American ground combat forces, dispersed into the local population in an effort to win their hearts and minds away from the insurgent enemy, and to eventually build a nation.

It is a recipe for a long-term American combat presence in the world’s troubled spots. At present in the American Army there does not seem to be any alternatives. The inability to realistically consider alternatives reveals that the Army has become dogmatic, bound like a Gordian knot to the methods of population-centric counterinsurgency as the sole solution in Afghanistan and, potentially, in any other part of the world where instability and insurgencies are brewing.<sup>7</sup>

How did this happen? How did we get to a point where the American Army has developed a mentality, a worldview, a zeitgeist, of population-centric counterinsurgency, reflecting the American Army’s new way of war? The genesis for all of this was the US Army’s experience in Vietnam. The American Army lost that war, as Krepinevich argued, because under General William Westmoreland it tried to fight World War II all over again, a conventional war. The American Army did not understand population-centric COIN, could only think in terms of conventional warfare, and therefore lost, according to Krepinevich and others. Derivatives of this argument by author Lewis Sorley in his book *A Better War* say there was a radical change between General Westmoreland and his successor, General Creighton Abrams, and that Abrams redirected the American Army’s strategy and could have won if the American people and their policymakers had not lost their will.<sup>8</sup>

The British counterinsurgency campaign in Malaya is viewed in a similar way. As the standard understanding goes, just as with the radical change between Westmoreland and Abrams, so too in Malaya there was

a substantial shift in strategy between Generals Harold Briggs and Gerald Templer with their respective search-and-destroy and hearts-and-minds campaigns. Briggs, according to the stock explanations, focused too much on large-unit, conventional operations using search-and-destroy techniques trying to kill enemy insurgents, or what later commentators referred to as the enemy-centric approach. But it was Briggs's replacement, Sir Gerald Templer, who understood the importance of winning the hearts and minds of the population and shifted strategy to the classic population-centric counterinsurgency approach utilizing techniques designed to persuade the population to support the government and reject the insurgents.<sup>9</sup>

These historical interpretations have been seriously challenged and in a number of instances overturned by current historical scholarship. Regarding Vietnam, American scholars such as Andrew Birtle and Dale Andrade have shown that there was not a radical change between Westmoreland and Abrams, and that Westmoreland's strategy, at least in 1965 when faced with a conventional Communist threat inside South Vietnam, made sense. With regard to the British in Malaya, new scholarship by British historian Karl Hack strongly suggests that there was more continuity than discontinuity between Briggs and Templer and that the insurgency was actually broken during the Briggs years, not under Templer. Briggs, as this revisionist interpretation argues, based on newly released primary sources, broke the back of the insurgency through the use of military force directed against the insurgents, combined with an effective population resettlement program that took away the insurgents' base of support.<sup>10</sup>

### *COIN in Iraq*

From the history of the Vietnam War, fast forward to the Iraq War and the beginning of the Surge of forces in February 2007. At that time and even in the year before, one began to hear arguments that the reason things were going so badly in Iraq was because the American Army up to the point when the Surge was initiated did not fully understand how to execute COIN, and in the early years of the conflict was making the same mistakes it did in Vietnam and that the British initially made in Malaya. The primary mistake, as this standard explanation goes, was that the American Army was trying to fight a war of big battles in the Sunni triangle instead of using the proper approach—to apply Galula and win hearts and minds.<sup>11</sup>

In short, the conventionally minded American Army did not prepare for COIN before the war, did not understand how to execute it once the war started (except for a few exceptional units such as the 101st Airborne Division in Mosul, 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment in Talafar, or 1st

Brigade of the 1st Armored Division in Ramadi), and this lack of knowledge, experience, and training caused things to turn out so badly. But then things quickly turned around in February 2007 with the Surge of forces armed with a new counterinsurgency manual called FM 3-24. Under inspired new leadership the American Army started doing counterinsurgency correctly.<sup>12</sup> Best-known of the books that have espoused this narrative are Thomas Ricks's *Fiasco* and *The Gamble*, Linda Robinson's *Tell Me How This Ends*, and Kimberly Kagan's *The Surge: A Military History*.<sup>13</sup>

The triumph narrative associated with the Surge can best be summarized as follows. Prior to the Surge, the conventionally minded Army under General George Casey, when he was commander of Multi-National Force-Iraq, had allowed the insurgency to grow and by the end of 2006 had withdrawn from the rural regions and hunkered down on Forward Operating Bases while the Iraq civil war raged. But with the Surge, the new commander, General David Petraeus, armed his army with the new COIN doctrine in the form of FM 3-24 and deployed American combat forces into major population areas. Once in these locations, the US Army in Iraq began executing population-centric COIN correctly; they were able to secure the population, win the hearts and minds, and from this new position of power the deals cut with the Sons of Iraq, Moqtada al Sadr's retreat, and all the other successes flowed from the population-centric actions of the American Army.<sup>14</sup>

Consider these historical analogies that appear to perfectly support such a narrative. In Malaya, the failing Briggs to the successful Templer; in Vietnam, the anachronistic, conventionally minded Westmoreland to the enlightened, counterinsurgency-minded Abrams; and in Iraq, the Fulda Gap, big-battle strategy of Casey to the new way of population-centric counterinsurgency of Petraeus. More recently in Afghanistan, the change between General David McKiernan and General Stanley McChrystal, with the former being cast as the general who did not necessarily comprehend America's new way of war and was viewed as being a member of the "old school" Army.<sup>15</sup>

Quite possibly, the will of the Sunni insurgency broke long before the Surge went into full effect in the summer of 2007. A combination of brutal attacks by Shia militia in conjunction with the actions of the Iraqi Shia government and the continuing persecution by al Qaeda against the Sunni community convinced the insurgents that they could no longer counter all these forces and it was to their advantage to cut a deal with the Americans. To be sure, the reduction in violence that began in the summer of 2007 in Iraq had multiple causes, and the Surge did contribute. But to

think that the reduction of violence was primarily the result of American military action is hubris run amuck.<sup>16</sup>

### *Points of Criticism*

This combined Malaya, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan War narrative has turned the American Army's new counterinsurgency doctrine outlined in FM 3-24 into an oracle, a cipher that unlocks the keys to success in any counterinsurgency as long as its precepts, principles, and rules are adhered to. But there are points of criticism to the new doctrine that need to be seriously considered. First, it provides for only one way to counter insurgencies and deal with the world's instabilities, and that way is population-centric counterinsurgency. The manual offers no other alternatives, no other strategies or methodologies. There is a short five-line paragraph in Chapter 5 that considers more limited options. That short paragraph should have been turned into half of the manual.

Second, history has shown that insurgencies can be defeated by means other than the population-centric approach. Consider the recent defeat of the Tamil Tigers by the Sri Lankan military. Or consider what actually broke the back of the Malayan insurgency in the early 1950s, which was not so much the hearts-and-minds persuasion of Templer but the hard-handed use of military force against civilians, combined with a major resettlement program. FM 3-24 actually serves as a restatement of the counter-Maoist approach to insurgencies that military officers such as Galula and Sir Robert Thompson developed in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>17</sup> The end result is a counterinsurgency doctrine that has become a guiding set of operational principles for today's American Army and greater defense establishment. A doctrine based on lessons learned while combating the FLN insurgents in Algeria, Malaya Communist insurgents, and other Communist-inspired insurgencies some 50 years ago.

The American Army has become ahistorical in the manner in which it thinks about counterinsurgency, meaning it has difficulty thinking in a historical context. In a sense, it is as if the world of counterinsurgency warfare began suddenly around 1945 with the end of World War II and the rise of the Cold War, along with the numerous people's wars inspired by nationalism and communism. The term itself "counterinsurgency" is so heavily loaded with historical context, assumptions, myths, and absurdities that it has become almost meaningless. A set of case studies of counterinsurgency operations has been extracted from their historical context and turned into a large historical trope used to define and judge any small war, imperial war, or insurgency.<sup>18</sup>

What is needed to correct this fallacy is for this ahistorical view of counterinsurgency warfare to be integrated back to its historical context and combined with a much longer view of small-war history dating to the early 1800s.<sup>19</sup> Most worrisome for those concerned with the future of the American Army is that there has not been a wide-ranging debate over the efficacy and utility of this new way of war. Between 1976 and 1982, more than 110 published articles appeared in the professional journal, *Military Review*, fundamentally challenging the Army's doctrine at the time, the Active Defense. There has been no similar debate following the publication of FM 3-24 almost three years ago. What has appeared is a series of articles touting the triumph of the Surge, a narrative that has steamrolled the American Army into accepting this new way of war.

Some strategists say that if the United States is going to conduct nation-building, then the population-centric approach is the best. That may be true, but this article's thesis is that because this new way of war has become so dominant, it precludes America's Army from thinking in other more limited ways for dealing with instability and insurgencies.

This intellectual straightjacket of population-centric counterinsurgency has had other deleterious effects on the Army. It has pushed America's Army and other parts of the American defense establishment into fanciful thinking. The authors of FM 3-24 declare that counterinsurgency is the graduate level of warfare. Implicit in this statement is that conventional war is the undergraduate level. A respected counterinsurgency professional in the US Army, Colonel Robert Cassidy, said in a widely cited 2004 essay that conducting counterinsurgency warfare was "more difficult" than conventional war. Another counterinsurgency expert, David Ucko, in a recent book on what he calls the "new counterinsurgency era," argues that COIN with all of its associated political and economic tasks is "far more demanding" than the relatively simple process of "locating and striking targets."<sup>20</sup>

In fact, COIN is arguably less complex precisely because it is less "kinetic." There is very little room for commander or soldier error in high-intensity combat. People are killed immediately, and sometimes many of them. COIN is executed at a slower pace and, thus, can be more forgiving. People get killed, yes, but far fewer than in fighting at the higher end of the conflict spectrum; and more importantly in COIN there is a great deal more time to assess, judge, and decide.

### ***Something Revolutionary?***

Counterinsurgency experts in the American defense establishment have gone to great lengths to turn their new way of war into something rev-



olutionary, something radically different from the past, something more complex and qualitatively more difficult than what came before.<sup>21</sup> The Prussian theorist of war, Carl von Clausewitz, said that “everything in war is very simple . . . but the simplest thing is difficult.” To be fair, it is not that COIN or conventional warfare is the harder or easier. All warfare is demanding and difficult, that is why it is called war. In the 1920s, the German Army, as it thought its way through the lessons of the First World War, understood this point. Under the leadership of the brilliant German General Hans von Seeckt, they believed that the nature of war was essentially unchanging even if the means, machines, and milieu of it do change. Von Seeckt and his officers rejected what they referred to as any “schema” for war that tried to reduce its nature to a list of principles and rules.<sup>22</sup>

The COIN experts seem to believe that they are “young Turks” who have figured out the true political nature of war compared to the old, conventionally minded American military leaders who did not care about such things and only wanted to focus on tactics. Since population-centric COIN involves political activities at low levels such as platoons, companies, and battalions (for example, establishing village governing councils, etc.), its proponents then assume that the tactical activities that involve politics in the execution of COIN mean that those executing this doctrine understand the political nature of war writ large.<sup>23</sup> But in theory, there is nothing more political in a platoon leader in the Korengal Valley talking to a sheik about local governance than there was of a rifle platoon leader storming the beach at Normandy. Again, to cite the old Prussian, “War in all of its action and forms is fundamentally a political act.”

With the new American way of war as population-centric counterinsurgency, the Army has lost track of what has happened to its conventional warfighting skills. In 2008, three US Army colonels, all former combat brigade commanders in Iraq, told Army Chief of Staff General George Casey that after seven years of conducting almost nothing but population-centric counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Army’s field artillery branch had lost its ability to fight and had become a “dead branch walking.” Others have also expressed concern over the atrophying of core fighting competencies. Commenting on the widely read *Small Wars Journal* blog, Major Ike Sallee, an infantry officer with two combat tours in Iraq, stated:

The Army, if we want to remain a profession, is best served in adhering to core values, principles, and capabilities. If the core is strong . . . then we are able to transfer capability to other methods. But if we focus on methods (area-specific tactics, techniques, and procedures) at the expense of core capabilities (offensive, defensive, protection, battle drills, marksman-

ship, physical fitness) we will be chasing our tails and may find ourselves lacking identity and relevance . . . . If forced to prioritize (inevitable for the foreseeable future)—focus on core capabilities . . . what our Army can do exclusively for our Nation. If we are thrown into a condition requiring counterinsurgency tactics, we will be able to adapt because of our well-trained competencies.

The essential point and concern expressed by Major Sallee is that an army's core capability is to fight at every level of command. If it can do that, it can do almost anything.<sup>24</sup> This is not an argument to stop the focus on COIN operations, since they are the missions the Army has been assigned by the nation's political leaders. The critique of population-centric COIN is a call for the American Army to honestly look at itself and the risks that it is taking.

There are indeed risks. History and more recent events show what happens when armies trained and organized for counterinsurgencies and small wars have to rapidly adapt to missions at the higher end of the conflict spectrum. The French Army's failure in the Franco-Prussian War of 1871 was partly due to the influence from colonial warfare, as was the British Army's experience in the early months of the Second Boer War.

The Israeli Defense Forces' recent experience in Lebanon is another good example. There were many reasons for its failure, but one of them, as validated by scholars and analysts, is that its army had done almost nothing but COIN in the Palestinian territories, and its ability to fight against a strident enemy had atrophied. During the past few months a number of studies have been published on Israel's 2008 operations in Gaza. What these reports show is that the Israeli military, especially its army, realized what had happened to them in Lebanon and took the intervening two years to get back to the basics of war fighting; critical competencies such as synchronizing fire, maneuver, and intelligence at all levels of command against a hostile force.<sup>25</sup> The American Army would do well to pay attention to what the Israeli army has undergone in the past two years.

The COIN zeitgeist has convinced many observers that conventionally trained and minded armies cannot do counterinsurgency warfare. This belief is not supported by history. Examples of success are the American Army in the Philippines, the British Army in Malaya, and the US Army in Vietnam and moreover in Iraq starting in 2003, not 2007.<sup>26</sup> It is dangerous, however, to think that this principle can operate in reverse, as the example of the Israelis in Lebanon demonstrates. Imagine how well the drive on Baghdad would have gone in 2003 if the American Army had spent the majority of its training time in the years prior learning to talk to sheiks, rebuild schools, or conduct negotiations.

But the most damaging consequence to the American Army from the new zeitgeist of COIN is that it has taken the Army's focus off of strategy. Currently, US military strategy is really nothing more than a bunch of COIN principles, massaged into catchy commander's talking points for the media, emphasizing winning the hearts and minds and shielding civilians. The result is a strategy of tactics and principles.

### ***Conclusion***

Instead of American Army officers reading the so-called COIN classic texts of Galula, Thompson, Kitson, and Nagl, they should be reading the history of the British Empire in the latter half of the nineteenth century. It is in this period that if they did nothing else right the British Army and government did understand the value of strategy. They understood the essence of linking means to ends. In other words, they did not see military operations as ends in themselves but instead as a means to achieve policy objectives. And they realized that there were costs that had to be paid.<sup>27</sup>

The new American way of war has eclipsed the execution of sound strategy, producing never-ending campaigns of nation-building and attempts to change entire societies in places like Afghanistan. One can only guess at the next spot on the globe for this kind of crusade.<sup>28</sup> Former Army officer and writer Craig Mullaney, who recently penned a book-portrait of himself and what he learned in combat, said that the "Achilles' heel for Americans is our lack of patience." But perhaps not; perhaps America's lack of patience in wars like Iraq and Afghanistan should be seen as a virtue in that it could act as a mechanism to force the US military to execute strategy in a more efficient and successful manner. Doing strategy better would leverage the American Army out of its self-inflicted box of counterinsurgency tactics and methodologies into a more open assessment of alternatives to current military actions in Afghanistan.

The new American way of war commits the US military to campaigns of counterinsurgency and nation-building in the world's troubled spots. In essence it is total war—how else can one understand it any differently when COIN experts talk about American power "changing entire societies"—but it is a total war without the commensurate total support of will and resources from the American people. This strategic mismatch might prove catastrophic in the years ahead if the United States cannot figure out how to align means with ends in a successful strategy. The new American way of war perverts and thus prevents us from doing so.

The ancient Chinese philosopher of war Sun Tzu had this to say about the conduct of war and implicitly about its nature:

Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory . . . . Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat . . . . There is no instance of a nation benefitting from prolonged warfare . . . . Speed is the essence of war.<sup>29</sup>

The new American way of war—wars amongst the people—has turned Sun Tzu’s maxim on its head. These days it is customary to think of war and conflict as prolonged affairs that afflict the farthest-flung precincts of US influence, thereby demanding a long-term American military presence on the ground. We are told by the experts that this new way of war requires time, patience, modest amounts of blood, and vast amounts of treasure. Sun Tzu was highlighting strategy, and strategy is about choice, options, and the wisest use of resources in war to achieve political objectives. Yet in the new way of American war, tactics have buried strategy, and it precludes any options other than an endless and likely futile struggle to achieve the loyalty of populations that, in the end, may be peripheral to American interests.

#### NOTES

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24. Ike Sallee, comment on "One Army or Two?" *Small Wars Journal* blog, 19 July 2009, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2009/06/one-army-or-two/#c003418>; and Sean MacFarland, Michael Shields, and Jeffrey Snow, "The King and I: The Impending Crisis in Field Artillery's Ability to Provide Fire Support to Maneuver Commanders," available on the National Public Radio Web site, <http://www.npr.org/documents/2008/may/artillerywhitepaper.pdf>. For an argument on the need for a fighting general-purpose Army, see Gian P. Gentile, "The Imperative for an American General Purpose Army that Can Fight," *Orbis*, 53 (Summer 2009), 457-70.
25. For the latest analysis on the Israeli Defense Forces in Lebanon and Gaza, see Matt M. Matthews, "The Israeli Defense Forces Response to the 2006 War with Hezbollah," *Military Review*, 89 (July/August 2009), 41-51.
26. On the American Army in Iraq and how it learned and adapted from 2003 to 2005, see Donald P. Wright and Timothy R. Reese, *On Point II: Transition to the New Campaign; The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom, May 2003-January 2005* (Fort Leavenworth, Kans.: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2008).
27. See Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa: White Man's Conquest of the Dark Continent from 1876 to 1912* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).
28. See, for example, Michael O'Hanlon's call for a new type of American Army unit called a "Peace Operations Division" that could intervene in the Congo, "U.S. Boots on Congo Ground: A New Kind of Force Could Provide Security," *The Washington Post*, 14 August 2009, A17.
29. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Samuel B. Griffith, trans. (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1963).