

Book Reviews

INSURGENTS & INSURGENCIES

The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War

By Fred Kaplan

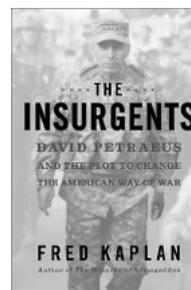
Reviewed by Brigadier General Kimberly C. Field, Deputy Director, Strategy Plans and Policy, DA 3/5/7

For my promotion, John Nagl gave me a copy of Fred Kaplan's *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War* signed by the military journalist himself. And so, the book opens: "A few days shy of his 25th birthday, John Nagl saw his future disappear." The book chronicles a small group's attempt to shift the American way of war from one of high-tech, big weapons focused on enemy combatants, to one that held people as the center of gravity. Kaplan's account—there are others, and there will be more—is worth a read, even if Nagl isn't your friend.

The Insurgents is a readable and informative account of a critical time in the history of American involvement in conflicts overseas, regardless of whether or not you accept the conclusions. Throughout the book, Kaplan weaves descriptions of the Department of Defense culture—including examples like Andy Marshall's Revolution in Military Affairs, and Bosnia not being a "real war"—with the academic and military background of a small group of thinkers, many anchored in West Point and its Department of Social Sciences. This group includes David Petraeus, John Nagl, David Kilcullen, Mike Meese, Ike Wilson, H. R. McMaster, Sarah Sewell, Gunner Sepp, Bill Hix, and their most important professional and academic influencers—Jack Galvin, David Galula, Alexander George, T. E. Lawrence, and others.

Kaplan provides the reader a play-by-play account of the intellectual wrangling that occurred within the Pentagon, inside the national security decisionmaking apparatus of the Bush and Obama Administrations, and on the ground in Iraq. He builds to the implication that the consequence of the group's effort was the replacement of one doctrine (air-land battle) with another (COIN). This took a herculean effort by a unique group of true believers to recalibrate the machine, but once accomplished, the machine could not get the entire job done. He excuses the leaders of the COIN movement by concluding that some wars are winnable (Iraq) and some are not (Afghanistan).

Good as this tale is, I admit to feeling a "here we go again" exasperation about halfway through: more glorification of a certain set of people, chief among them General David Petraeus. Kaplan is guilty of marginalizing other leaders who were instrumental in developing and implementing COIN strategy. Two kinds of contributions were required to change the military: those who drove an intellectually rigorous process that required bureaucratic and political savvy; and those who implemented the policy in the field and then fed back necessary adaptations. *The Insurgents* emphasized the thinkers, not the doers.



New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2013

418 pages

\$28.00

The overlap of the two sets is mostly limited to one man, David Petraeus—a conceptual thinker who starts with an understanding of the problem and the big ideas associated with it, values academia and multiple perspectives, is hyper-efficient in his habits, made it his job to master his role in the body politic, and has the personal fortitude to operationalize all of it. So I am able to put a better point on the exasperation expressed above: it is the *rarity* of the combination Petraeus embodies that damns the military culture, and so we have yet another author criticizing the dearth of creative thinking and courage among the military's ranks.

Indeed, Kaplan cannot help but take jabs at the military as he chronicles the struggle it took to adapt. He says “only the most confident and nurtured young officer” would take on the Army establishment as Petraeus did with an article he ghost wrote for Galvin. He implies Nagl's retirement as a lieutenant colonel had to do with writing that the Army was not a learning organization. He characterizes the “Sosh” Department as comprised of officers who doubted the judgment of their superiors, implying they were correct to do so. He states that during the Cold War, being an MP or a Civil Affairs officer was “no way to get ahead, so the best officers steered clear”. He writes, “TRADOC got a new commander who saw no point in long range thinking” during the 1990s. Is Kaplan correct in his commentary about the Army? Where there's smoke there's bound to be fire, but the truth is almost always in the middle. Those who cling to the centrality of force-on-force do so for good reason; but given that military power alone will be decisive only in the most limited-objective scenarios, DOD must ensure the conventional force culture does not preclude the agility and creativity required to provide a full range of options essential to safeguarding the interests of the American people.

The book has one other major flaw: it digs deep into Iraq but skims over Afghanistan. Let's set aside the questions of whether or not we really “won” in Iraq, and whether we thoughtlessly conflated COIN planning and doctrine with the strategic *objectives* we tried to achieve in Afghanistan. Did the “COINdinistas” get it right? Perhaps so in Iraq and Kaplan explains that well. Afghanistan was, and is, another matter, and his explanation is unsatisfying on two levels.

By the surge in Afghanistan, operationally, COIN had perhaps turned into “dogma,” but not because the COIN leaders held onto it as written in 2006. Rather, because, as Kaplan does not quite say, they did *not* hang onto it . . . and did not proclaim this rejection publicly. By publicly espousing a comprehensive COIN strategy and privately rejecting all but the emphasis on security (and indeed, General Petraeus put significant personal energy into the Afghan Local Police program), the opportunity to adapt the broader COIN doctrine and strategy was precluded. To my mind, watching and participating one level down, General Petraeus accepted Galula's necessary preconditions for success in a counterinsurgency campaign, and finding none of them in Afghanistan, changed course. He inherited a COIN campaign plan that may or may not have been right, and then quietly used members of the original COIN team, Jack Keane and the Kagans in particular, to focus almost exclusively on kill-capture. The potential result is ironic and harmful: no more COIN.

But Kaplan also does not quite say that General Petraeus was astutely reading the political writing on the wall and probably knew the mission was not going to be resourced as much or as long as required—which was the biggest problem of all with Afghanistan. And here Kaplan really comes up short: he seems to credit and even applaud the administration with out-foxing its military leaders, and provides no further analysis on whether or not that was the correct thing to do with regard to mission accomplishment. In fact, I could not help but feel I was taken on a bit of a ride. Kaplan spends a good deal of the book building up Petraeus and the group, only to take some glee by ultimately implying not only that they got what they deserved in Afghanistan, but that the Obama administration was brighter than the best of the brightest.

Kaplan writes of the eventual recognition that “Afghanistan is not Iraq.” Right, it’s not. But understanding did not lead to meaningful adaptation operationally or politically. We simply have to understand where we went wrong in Afghanistan in all realms. We cannot thoughtlessly throw the COIN bathwater out with the Afghanistan baby. Kaplan tap-dances around these most critical issues. Perhaps he had a foregone conclusion about the Afghan mission; perhaps he felt he had to tread carefully with regard to General Petraeus while lauding the Obama administration.

Nor is it my intent to tarnish anyone's armor. Simply because a mentor and role model reaches a super-human limit (in part due to the bottom-line principle under which we operate—civilian control of the military), does not negate his super-human contributions. *The Insurgents* throws something else into stark relief—as indefatigable as General Petraeus is, it is somehow unbelievable and unfair that we as a nation should have been so dependent on the energy, intellect, leadership, and savvy of one man for so long. Regardless of whether or not he cultivated that position, when he was finally “beat” we should take no satisfaction in it. I can’t help but think of lives lost.

The “plot to change the American way of war” had a larger point: the requirement to meet national objectives in situations in which an adversary’s military forces are not the center of gravity is enduring. Regardless of “we won’t do long, big COIN operations anymore” proclamations, the country will undoubtedly need those skills for small, short missions . . . or, indeed, another unexpectedly long, big war.

An interagency group should conduct a comprehensive lessons-learned analysis of this toughest of COIN scenarios—the strategic case study that is Afghanistan. In this reviewer’s opinion, the required security-governance progression was much less linear in Afghanistan than Iraq; the development effort should have started with strengths instead of the bottomless “needs” pit; the effort needed rational decisiveness from Washington with regard to handling the Karzai regime; and “Af-Pak” should have gone beyond titular.

If we arrive at a dead end, only then should we say Kaplan’s conclusions were right after all—some wars are not winnable no matter what brain power you throw at them. Call it countercultural for an Army officer to believe mission accomplishment of any kind is impossible. Or call it a necessary part of being a member of a learning organization.