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[Counter-Insurgency](#)

The COIN of the Realm...Is a Wooden Nickel

By [C. Christine Fair](#) March 13, 2013 [5 Comments](#)



Getty Images

The much-heralded doctrine of counter-insurgency (COIN) has been a profitable and career-enhancing bromide.

COIN proponents such as one-time Army generals David Petraeus and Stanley McChrystal — and their acolytes, such as John Nagl and David Kilcullen, and their Beltway-bandit allies such as Seth Jones, Andrew Exum and the Kagans, among numerous others — have made their careers arguing for the sagacity of COIN approaches, first in [Iraq](#) and then in [Afghanistan](#).

They argued for the surge of troops in Afghanistan, insisted upon having just one more “fighting season” to soften up the [Taliban](#), and resisted the path of diplomacy to resolve a war that clearly cannot be ended through fighting. Some of these same personalities are penning saccharine pieces — [here](#) and [here](#), for example — explaining “what went wrong” in Afghanistan. Of course, none of these vaunted personalities starts (inevitably) his exposition of failure with himself and his own flawed advice.

And there lies the rub.

After leading our country down a failed path, they continue to foist themselves into the limelight by offering insights that should have been obvious years ago. Yet the Gravy Train keeps on chugging. It's time to hold these people to account for the trillions wasted, the thousands of American lives lost, and the tens of thousands of Afghans who have died regrettably for nothing.

Some of these COINdinistas have made a killing peddling their books in which they argued for “population-centric counter insurgency” and the need to “win hearts and minds.” One need only enter “counter-insurgency” or “Afghanistan” into Amazon’s search engine to see the multitude of books penned in which the varied authors hock this this putrid snake oil.

The much-praised Army and Marines *Field Manual*—324 (FM-324), [here](#), was based upon a selective reading of history, drawing mostly from failed counterinsurgency campaigns in environments that have no resemblance to Afghanistan. Worse, many assumed that whatever lessons that were learned in Iraq could be applied to Afghanistan.

I cannot count the number of times that military personnel in Afghanistan told me that “Afghanistan is just like Iraq. It’s Muslim and tribal.” The only things that Iraq and Afghanistan have in common are the presence of the letter “a” and that the U.S. invaded both countries.

The application of FM-324 to Afghanistan or other theatre is somewhat akin to your doctor telling you that you have a brain tumor and that she has reviewed all previous operations to contend with this tumor. Based upon her rigorous review of past failed procedures, she is convinced she can save you with her new surgical technique based upon this history of disasters. She assures you that this untried method will work on *you*.

Most sane people would bolt for the door and seek a more sagacious approach based upon a review of successful procedures, perhaps informed by a review of past failures. Yet FM-324 was but a selective account of past failures through which the troupe of authors hoped to put forward a doctrine that would be tested on the ground. The “guinea pigs” would be American and allied troops and civilians, as well as the local populations of Iraq and Afghanistan.

In a recent round-table discussion in *Foreign Policy*, [here](#), numerous authors offer their insights into why the Americans have failed to win in Afghanistan. Without fail, each and every author points to someone else’s failures.

Yet, with few exceptions, most of the authors were involved in forging the disastrous strategy that the United States has pursued at various points in time. While these author pretend to be observers, they were part of the sanguinary policy that has resulted in little more than body bags, burials, injuries of body and mind, and vast expenditure of treasure.

Yet none of these authors begin from the humble position of where they went wrong. And many of these authors indeed went very, very wrong. In some cases, the authors are *still* wrong in their assessment and prescription of best courses. Why is it so hard for these COIN acolytes to concede their agency in this disastrous concatenation of failed policies? After all, many of these authors have made careers and profit streams off of their dubious arguments about how best to wage this war.

Instead of sanctimonious whining that locates the problems in the failings of others, I would like to see a redux of the *Foreign Policy* roundtable wherein the authors begin with a reflection of what has gone wrong by looking at themselves, their judgments, their mistaken assessments and the policies their woefully pathetic understanding of Afghanistan contributed to this morass.

After all, how many of these purported “Afghan experts” stepped into the region much less Afghanistan before 9/11? Most of today’s so-called Afghanistan experts were created by the toxic admixture of personal hubris and ample U.S. government funds to outsource a genuine understanding of the war and the terrains in which it has been fought.

The standards for an “Af-Pak” expert are risibly low. Note that both Afghans and Pakistanis loathe this portmanteau of ignominy. Such experts need not have language skills. They need not have travelled in either country without the escort of a military organization. Astonishingly [some of these experts](#) have even argued that country experts need not have even visited the country about which they profess to be an “expert.” They need not have any historical understanding of either country or the region that was not funded by the department of defense or intelligence agencies to acquire. Most of these “hackademics” rehearsed British-era observations as if they were contemporary fact. When the history of this war is written, it will likely be described in terms of military Orientalism.

As someone who has spent my career in South Asia, I will remain in the region while the Beltway bandits begin to ply their war-mongering formulae to other, new and lucrative, theatres. My fellow colleagues who have specialized in this region will wrestle with the imperial hubris that motivated this war from the beginning. However, as this history is still being written, revised, and rewritten, the American population should demand an explanation for our spent treasure and lost lives now.

We should request that pundits accept responsibility for their contributions to this mess and own up to it. While they can count their successes in book royalties, lecture circuit fees, and interviews, we count our losses of loved ones, of lives cut short, and by lives permanently altered by injuries. The privilege of being a highly-regarded pundit should come with the responsibility of accepting credit for failures as much as the preferred option of accepting accolades.

As terribly as the Americans and their allies have suffered, the Afghans have even greater losses to count. No doubt asking these pundits to own responsibility requires a degree of intellectual integrity that most seem to lack. The name of the game is often secure a lucrative DoD or CIA contract to pedal your or your organization’s flawed diagnosis and pocket the generous profit and then move on to the next source of funding. No one is rewarded for hoisting themselves upon their own petards.

Enough of this sanctimonious nonsense.

Before we impassively accept the analysis of one of the prophets of this war and his (or occasionally her) explanation of how defeat can be explained by everyone else’s ineptitude, we should demand that they explain how they contributed to this mess.

We must ask them how they sleep at night profiting on a war that has sent so many to their graves and consigned others to a life with severe injuries? We should ask them whether or not their books and CNN appearances and op-eds in prestigious outlets are worth the pain and suffering their purportedly analytical pursuits inflicted upon the men and women who had to bear the cost of their ever-so profitable experiment.

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