

Editor's Introduction

J. Brent Wilson

Volume 27, numéro 1, summer 2007

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs27_1ed01

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-5673 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Wilson, J. B. (2007). Editor's Introduction. *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 27(1), 1–2.

Editor's Introduction

On 12-13 October 2006, the Gregg Centre at the University of New Brunswick and the Tactics School at the Combat Training Centre, Base Gagetown, New Brunswick, Canada, jointly hosted a two-day professional development conference on counterinsurgency. Neither the content nor the timing of the conference was accidental. In 2005, Canada had agreed to take on a counter-insurgency mission in Afghanistan, which began in earnest in February 2006. Over the course of that year troops from Base Gagetown undertook to prepare and train for their rotation, which would begin in February 2007. At an early stage the Tactics School and the Gregg Centre agreed that a conference on the subject of counterinsurgency would benefit both those preparing for impending deployment and Canadian army tactical training as a whole.

The conference brought together a dozen speakers from Canada, the United States, and Europe, many of whom were soldiers with recent experience in Afghanistan or Iraq. Among them were three prominent academic experts on counterinsurgency whose role was to provide an intellectual framework and context for understanding the problem. Their presentations, revised into essays, comprise the first three articles in this issue.

Thomas Mockaitis of DePaul University, who delivered the keynote address, describes counterinsurgency as a 'Phoenix' — a phenomenon long thought dead, but now reborn. Never a core mission for any army except the British, it was associated with failure during the Vietnam War, and the Americans and others largely forgot about it. But the post-9/11 wars in Iraq and Afghanistan revived the need to adapt to and conduct such campaigns. The 're-learning curve' has been steep and costly, and not just for the Americans. He argues that the new American counterinsurgency manual adopts the proven principles of the British doctrine: winning hearts and minds, using force in a selective manner based on good intelligence freely given, and civil-military cooperation. It remains to be seen whether or not the new approach will succeed in these new conflicts. But one thing at least seems certain; insurgent-style conflicts will occur for the foreseeable future and armed forces must prepare to deal with them. The Phoenix may become dormant for a time but it is certain to be reborn yet again.

Tom Marks of the National Defense University offers a different take on the problem. He points out that insurgencies usually arise from local conflicts and often are fought at and confined to that realm. But, he argues, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, insurgency has taken on a 'global' character, and it is essential that statesmen and commanders alike recognize this change in the nature of insurgency. They also need to realize that counterinsurgency is not just a way of fighting at the tactical or operational level; it is a 'strategic' category of war-fighting. Drawing on historical cases and the writings of key thinkers, he offers a three-point strategy: put in place that which is correct, that which is sustainable, and play for the breaks. Counterinsurgency attacks the insurgent doc-

trine/approach. Its strategic goal is legitimacy; its operational goal is to neutralize the counter-state; and its tactical goal is to dominate the human terrain.

Finally, Geoffrey Shaw of the American Military University, who is writing a book on Afghanistan's military history, draws attention to the historical consistencies of the Afghan reaction to foreign intervention. The British in the nineteenth century, the Russians in the 1980s, and now the Canadians have all found the Afghan guerrilla fighter a formidable opponent whose tenacity on the battlefield defies the odds. He suggests that this calls into question whether ISAF has "the credible capacity to coerce" the Taliban. He doubts that it has and consequently concludes that our preconceptions of the Afghan war and the Taliban may be incorrect. Shaw feels that the situation calls for a fundamental rethinking of the Western approach as practiced so far. Otherwise, we may be condemned to constantly relive a counterinsurgency version of the film *Groundhog Day*, in which the learning process is repeated until we get it right. Like Mockaitis and Marks, Shaw turns to the "British model" for inspiration and guidance. But, in a cautionary note, he also conjures up the 'ghosts' of Vietnam and places them alongside the situation in Afghanistan to remind us how the best-intentioned policies can still go wrong.

If there is a single theme woven through all three essays, it is that the history of counterinsurgency can teach us a great deal that is relevant to the conflicts of today. We would ignore that history at our peril.