

The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One

By David Kilcullen. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 340 pp., index.

Reviewed by Matthew P.

David Kilcullen's *Accidental Guerrilla* is at once an intellectual memoir of the author's field research, a contribution to the academic discourse on counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, and a prescription for the Western establishment to manage more smartly the many smaller conflicts included in the so-called war on terror. Kilcullen—a former Australian army officer who has served as a civilian adviser to the US government on counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, including during the 2007 surge of US forces in Iraq—argues that the vast majority of persons the West faces in these conflicts had no initial intention of fighting but instead were moved to action by an extremist minority. Therefore the West should pursue courses that counteract the conditions that allow extremists to manipulate segments of populations into becoming “accidental” guerrillas rather than targeting certain individuals or groups. Engaging conflicts in the way Kilcullen suggests would have profound implications for intelligence.

Kilcullen examines recent activity in several theaters, primarily Afghanistan (2006–2008) and Iraq (2006–2007), and to lesser extents East Timor (1999–2000), southern Thailand (2004–2007), the Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan (2006–2008), and immigrant communities in Europe. Though not all of Kilcullen's case studies are in Muslim areas, Islam figures prominently because of the frequency with which insurgent or terrorist activity is a function of *takfiri* Islam, which professes conversion to Islam by force and death for the unwilling—as a recurring script for violent resistance.

In looking at these cases the author uses a medical analogy suggesting phases of an infectious disease: “infection”—the entry of extremists into a vulnerable area; “contagion”—the spread of extremist influence; “intervention”—the engagement of establishment, often Western-partnered, security services; “rejection”—the hoped-for elimination of the insurgent or terrorist group by the population.

What does Kilcullen suggest? Western intervention—if done at all—should be low-profile and should demonstrate that the West is advocating the well-being of populations and not imposing outside systems—no matter how altruistic or rational in Western eyes. Strategies should emphasize the population: building trust, creating good governance, establishing credible security services, maintaining relationships with local officials, and marketing the success of all of the above to those in the population who are wavering. Overwhelming use of force and search-and-destroy techniques that risk high collateral damage and rally locals in oppo-

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations.

sition should be avoided—though he does not dismiss selective operations against terrorist or insurgent leaders.

Kilcullen's case study of the construction of the road through Afghanistan's Kunar Province during 2007–2008 illustrates how these practices can be carried out and demonstrated that the engagement of the local population in the planning, construction, and security of the operation mattered more than the road itself. Similarly, he points out, success in Iraq involved bringing tribes and insurgent groups into sanctioned security arrangements and gave locals alternatives to the extremist option.

The success of Kilcullen's approach would seem to require intense partnering of intervening forces with the governments, especially the security and intelligence services, of the host countries, a subject that would benefit from further study. Local governments themselves must consider the repercussions of moves against violent Islamist movements in their borders. In some cases, a host government or security service might actually *want* to perpetuate traditional Western counterterrorist practices and lexicon—for example, by getting its internal oppositionists on certain terrorist lists or military classifications (foreign terrorist, common enemy, etc.) a host government may acquire new Western funding, legal authorities, and more powerful tools with which the host government can suppress its internal opposition. Kilcullen's thesis would have applications here, and it would be profitable to inquire further into how to manage these host interests.

Given the profound role intelligence would have to play, Kilcullen says surprisingly little of specific intelligence entities, though at one point he lauds the World War II-era US Office of Strategic Services as a model for civilian-military interaction with a strategic purpose. As he stresses, counteracting conditions that extremists exploit requires intimacy with the local environments. Collecting, analyzing, and articulating objective ground truth to decisionmakers are essential. Also important are covert, unconventional warfare options—an “indirect approach that ruthlessly minimizes American presence” (285). These might include propaganda and counterpropaganda; increased liaison relationships with (and presumably, penetrations of) host-country intelligence services; assistance to selected local leaders or groups to increase their patronage and authority to serve as vessels of influence; support to community programs, e.g. civic centers; health care; moderate (in the case of religious-based) educational institutions; and, more broadly, elevation of expertise in the Western intelligence community.

Overall, Kilcullen's thesis is convincing, and the book is a notable addition to the literature of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism in providing another antidote to the “enemy-centric” doctrines that have often failed and to the oversimplification of the lexicon of the war on terror. Both have tended to obscure the complex realities of local conditions and prevented adoption of the best solutions. Even if concepts Kilcullen has raised are familiar to recent Western military and intelligence practitioners and students of guerrilla conflict, *The Accidental Guerrilla* presents a systematic way of looking, based on smart analysis and research, at the complexities of global strategy in this age.

