

Tracking the History of a Counterinsurgency Expert: Four Books by David Kilcullen

(Oxford University Press, 2009–2016)

Reviewed by JR Seeger

- *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (2009), 346 pp., maps, photos.
- *Counterinsurgency* (2010), 251 pp., photos.
- *Out of the Mountains: The Coming of Age of the Urban Guerrilla* (2013), 342 pp., photos.
- *Blood Year: The Unraveling of Western Counterterrorism* (2016) 288 pp., maps.

In the last 15 years, David Kilcullen has become one of the most influential scholar-warriors of his generation. Kilcullen started his career as an Australian infantry officer. During his service, Kilcullen was deployed to East Timor and West Papua. His interests in the local insurgency there resulted in a PhD in anthropology from the Australian Defence Force Academy in 2000 with a thesis entitled, “The Political Consequences of Military Operations in Indonesia, 1945–1999: A Fieldwork Analysis of the Political Power-Diffusion Effects of Guerrilla Conflict.” This began Kilcullen’s transformation from a well-respected infantry officer to a leading strategist and policy expert in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, in both Australia and the United States. He served as an advisor to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan from 2005 to 2011, the special advisor for counterterrorism to the Secretary of State from 2005 to 2009, as well as a senior counterinsurgency advisor to General Petraeus in 2007, when Petraeus was commander of the Multinational Force—Iraq. He is currently the chairman of Caerus Global Solutions.

A review of all of Kilcullen’s publications is outside the scope of this paper. Instead, this paper focuses on the four books he has published since 2009. In these four books, we see Kilcullen working through the changing counterinsurgency and counterterrorism threat landscape, and in each book, he focuses on strategic and policy issues, offering specific tactical and operational guidance to on-the-ground practitioners involved in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism.

Most of Kilcullen’s arguments are not entirely new and, to his credit, he acknowledges the fact that he is writing on a subject that has a long history.^a His focus on the human motivations of allies, neutrals, and adversaries and the cultural and politico-military environment of the conflict is consistent with that of many earlier writers on the subject. For example, his focus on the importance of the motivations of locals as a key to understanding the reasons for an insurgency or terrorism is entirely consistent with the writings of previous experts in the same fields. What makes the Kilcullen books well worth reading is that he has applied the same theories of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism to the current world, where culture and ideology are mixed with accelerating factors more often studied by economists and futurists. In short, he is using established theory, modified to address the 21st century, in which insurgents and terrorists are linked to the outside world through transnational economies and global telecommunications networks.

In the first two books, Kilcullen describes the hostile environments that the US government faced in the first 10 years of the 21st century. US forces were fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as in multiple, smaller but just as deadly actions in other regions of the globe. The original counterterrorism purpose for these conflicts—the hunt for terrorists and/or the defeat of state and non-state sponsors of terrorism—had an entirely different result. By 2005, both US conventional ground forces and US special operations forces were fighting counterinsurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan with little strategic gain, while still hunt-

a. Some of the classics of counterinsurgency that serve as the background for Kilcullen’s material including Mao Tse-Tung *On Guerrilla Warfare*; Roger Trinquier’s work *Modern Warfare: a French View of Counterinsurgency*; David Galula’s *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*; Frank Kitson’s work on British counterinsurgency entitled, *Bunch of Five*; Edward Landsdale’s *In the Midst of Wars: An American’s Mission to Southeast Asia*; John Nagl’s *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam: Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*; and Thomas Hammes’s *The Sling and the Stone: On War in the 21st Century*.

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ing terrorist networks in both countries. In *The Accidental Guerrilla* and *Counterinsurgency*, Kilcullen focused his writing on capturing the reasons why these insurgencies occurred, the transformative nature of these insurgencies, and how US and allied forces might better address these challenges at the operational and tactical level. The title “the accidental guerrilla” arises from the premise that adversaries in conflict zones gain additional manpower simply in response to the actions of the counterinsurgency force. Individuals who had been neutral or even potential allies at the beginning of a conflict can become committed adversaries if they see the counterinsurgency force as doing more direct harm than the insurgents.

Kilcullen begins *The Accidental Guerrilla* with a list of ways to think about the new conflict environment, which Kilcullen describes as “complex, ambiguous, dynamic, and multi-faceted . . . impossible to describe through a single model.” (7) The four models to consider the problem, he suggests are:

- as a backlash against globalization,
- as a globalized insurgency,
- as a civil war within Islam, and
- as asymmetric warfare.

Kilcullen uses the example of three 21st century battles to help explain what happened, why it happened, and possible solutions for winning the battle or—at the very least—mitigating the damage that the conflict environment might do to the local population. In *Counterinsurgency*, Kilcullen reinforces this sophisticated argument by stating categorically, “Even if we are killing the insurgents effectively, if our approach also frightens and harms the local population, or makes people feel unsafe, then there is next-to-no chance that we will gain their support. If we want people to partner with us, put their weapons down, and return to unarmed political dialogue rather than work out their issues through violence, then we must make them feel safe enough to do so . . .” (4)

Kilcullen’s message in these two books argues for a level of nuance that is a challenge for any conventional military force commander who has young soldiers and Marines not trained in the culture and not able to speak the language of the people they are supposed to be protecting. The messages of these two books resonate

with what theatre commanders in Iraq and Afghanistan between 2008 and 2010 regarded as the “way forward.”

However, some of the same problems Kilcullen identifies in his first two books remain problems in the second decade of the 21st century. Akbar Ahmed in his 2013 work *The Thistle and the Drone* (Brookings Institution Press) reiterates Kilcullen’s premise of the risk of alienating local populations while attacking adversaries. It is clear that not all strategic advisors on terrorism and insurgency understood the challenges. This may have been due in part to the shift, late in the George W. Bush administration and early in that of Barack Obama toward a smaller military footprint in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and greater use of manned and unmanned air assets to conduct counterterrorism operations. If nothing else, Ahmed’s book underscores the importance of Kilcullen’s focus on cultural, economic, and political environments that create both insurgents and terrorists. In counterinsurgency and counterterrorism missions, kinetic solutions from the air alone will not translate to strategic success.

In the second two books, Kilcullen moves from a focus on counterinsurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan toward a focus on the international terrorist threat and the transformation of terrorist networks in the second decade of the century. *Out of the Mountains* is a very specific discussion of how the United States and US allies must transform strategic counterterrorism tactics, techniques, and procedures in response to terrorist networks’ moving from rural, mountainous safe havens to the mega-cities of the developing world. Kilcullen continues to use the term “guerrilla” and often conflates counterterrorism operations with counterinsurgency operations—in part, because he views al-Qa’ida as a globalized insurgency. This is not surprising because his experience in Iraq blurs the line between insurgents and terrorists, between those fighting in the cities (because they were hostile to a central government in Baghdad nominally allied to US and UK forces in country) and those fighting in the cities (because they were determined to establish an extremist foothold in a state riven with conflict).

Kilcullen argues that the nature of the conflict is going to change because

“. . . the context for these operations . . . will differ radically from what we’ve known since 9/11. In particular, research on demography and economic geog-

raphy suggest that four megatrends are driving most aspects of future life on the planet, including conflict. These are rapid population growth, accelerating urbanization, littoralization (the tendency for things to cluster on coastlines), and increasing connectedness. If we add the potential for climate-change effects such as coastal flooding, and note that almost all of the world's population growth will happen in coastal cities in low-income, sometimes unstable countries, and we can begin to grasp the complex challenges that lurk in this future environment.” (25)

In *Blood Year*, Kilcullen focuses on the rise of Daesh, also known as the Islamic State. He addresses the origins of Daesh and looks at the challenges the Western world faces in handling this new and complex terrorist threat. Kilcullen attributes some of the threat to the efforts of the United States and its allies to “disaggregate” al-Qa‘ida (AQ) by decapitating AQ leadership, by disrupting and demolishing AQ funding networks, and by breaking al-Qa‘ida into regional component parts. He argues that this disaggregation helped to build a different threat, which calls itself Daesh or the Caliphate.

“For those of us who worked so hard to ‘disaggregate’ al-Qa‘ida, the implication was as obvious as it was uncomfortable: a fully disaggregated terrorist movement, with an ideology insidiously attractive to alienated and damaged people likely to act on it, combined with omnipresent social media and communications tools that hadn’t even existed on 9/11, could enable a spread of terrorist violence unconstrained by time, space, money, or organizational infrastructure. Add in a do-it-yourself tactical toolkit of improvised weapons and random targets, and we could be

looking at an atomized, pervasive threat even harder to counter than the global insurgency it replaced.” (113)

In these two books, as with his two earlier works, Kilcullen brings the reader back from the academic and strategic and returns to the practical and tactical.

There have been many articles and books published on the conflicts that followed the tragedy of 9/11. Scholars have debated in detail the question of whether the United States has been fighting a “global war on terrorism,” a “transnational terrorist network,” or fighting multiple wars defined as insurgencies, civil war, and even “wars of civilization.” Kilcullen offers a different perspective on these conflicts. He sees the conflicts as part of a larger, single “global insurgency,” generated by and reflecting the massive changes that have taken place in the Islamic world at the end of the 20th and the first decades of the 21st century. While Kilcullen’s scholarship matches that of others in the field of military strategic thinking and structures an explanation for why we are facing the challenges we are facing, he never loses sight of the fact that many of his readers are practitioners of counterinsurgency and/or counterterrorism who are directly involved in these conflicts. He provides concrete recommendations for the practitioner, even as he closes his books on strategic transformation (or in the case of *Blood Year*, an argument on what he sees as our strategic failure). Kilcullen is not the only author that specialists in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency need to read, but he is certainly one of the authors that practitioners need to read if they wish to understand current and future threats and design strategies and tactics to address them.

