

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 45
Number 1 *Parameters Spring 2015*

Article 13

Spring 3-1-2015

Commentary and Reply

USAWC Press

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Recommended Citation

USAWC Press, "Commentary and Reply," *Parameters* 45, no. 1 (2015), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.2815.

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Commentary & Reply

On "Defeating the Islamic State"

Jason W. Warren

This commentary is in response to BG(R) Huba Wass de Czege's article "Defeating the Islamic State: Commentary on a Core Strategy" and Paul Rexton Kan's article "Defeating the Islamic State: A Financial-Military Strategy" published in the Winter 2014-15 issue of Parameters (vol. 44, no. 4).

Recent articles concerning the defeat of ISIS by BG(R) Huba Wass de Czege and Paul Rexton Kan in the Army's flagship journal *Parameters* seek to overturn Clausewitz's assertion that "War is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will." (*On War*, 75) The United States and its allies will not defeat ISIS through legitimacy-seeking-nation-building projects—for which the West does not currently have the political will to execute over the long term—nor by reducing ISIS's financial networks and waging a law-enforcement campaign against it. Host-peoples may perceive the West as arrogant in assuming it can force the "legitimacy" of an Iraqi or Syrian government on them. It would also be disingenuous to claim population-centric counterinsurgency operations, such as the "government in a box" proposed by BG(R) Wass de Czege, is not nation building, as these operations seek to clear the enemy, hold key terrain (and population centers), and build national forces and government (including public infrastructure). This is literally a description of nation building.

The most efficient way to combat ISIS is through the employment of US conventional military power supported by the strongest allies available in the region, such as the Kurdish *peshmerga*. The obvious "solution" is to fight fewer ill-advised conflicts in failed nation-states that have little strategic value to the United States or its allies. However, when that is not a possibility, the default option should not be population-centric counterinsurgency. There are a number of successful pre-1945 examples of counterinsurgency operations that have little to do with fostering host-nation legitimacy or conducting financial "warfare."

A social-science approach to warfare has overly influenced US military doctrine. This approach, which trumpets "engagement" as a warfighting function, seeks to redefine the nature of war. "Engaging" other cultures with joint military exercises and training, officer exchanges, and infrastructure projects, builds on a notion of counterinsurgency that has negatively influenced more conventional doctrine, hinging strategic success to the solidification of legitimacy for a host-nation government.

Building legitimacy, as espoused in FM 3-24, is beyond the scope of US military operations. As conflicts in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan have demonstrated, infrastructure projects and the imposition of "Western" rule of law on foreign peoples are fools' errands. A former Army company commander in Iraq recently challenged my claim population-centric COIN had failed—until I asked him what happened to the Iraqi government's legitimacy as soon as US troops left the area.

Major Jason Warren graduated from West Point and earned a PhD from Ohio State University. Serving in various positions from platoon through division, he has also deployed to Afghanistan and Sinai, Egypt. He recently taught military history at West Point, and now serves as Director of Concepts and Doctrine at the USAWC. He recently published *Connecticut Unscathed: Victory in the Great Narragansett War*.

A casual survey of the news in America reveals problems with corruption, and it is folly to think predominantly military forces with a sprinkling of interagency personnel can solve the intractable, centuries-long squabbles and injustices of other nations and peoples. History offers many examples of failed operations in this vein from Alexander the Great to the present.

Decision-makers tend to lack historical insight, however, and have little knowledge of past events since 1945, let alone antiquity. Training a military force in local culture and history, as community police, and for civil engineering, is beyond the capabilities of all but elite US units. It should thus come as little surprise that legitimacy-building efforts have failed since 1960, and in fact proponents of population-centric COIN cannot point to a single modern success, which begs the obvious question of why the United States continues to employ such methods. For example, John Nagl's assertion in *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, that the British succeeded in employing population-centric COIN in Malaysia has been debunked as a "one-off" based less on counterinsurgency and more on the de facto segregation of the Chinese insurgents (who were thus already separated from the Malaysian population at large), as well as the geographic situation of Malaysia.

Financial warfare and the use of law enforcement to confront adversaries like ISIS, are also only sideshows for the main event of armed confrontation. ISIS fighters cannot be arrested in the conventional sense, and the use of law enforcement to incarcerate Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters has met with only mixed success on previous battlefields—many returned to the battlefield after incarceration.

Victory is achievable through the employment of conventional forces accompanied by competent local allies, such as the Kurds. The main emphasis must be the finding and fixing of ISIS, and their ultimate destruction. Non-lethal counterinsurgency methods play a tangential role in this endeavor. As Peter Mansoor establishes in his book *Surge*, conventional forces employed during that phase of the Iraq campaign, used more lethality than in previous operations there. In fact, the restive Iraqi provinces imploded into sectarianism, and ISIS conquests soon followed once US forces departed, indicating non-lethal legitimacy and engagement had failed.

Special Operating Forces (SOF) and airpower (including drone strikes) play a tangential role in targeting ISIS leaders. Although SOF-Airpower will not win the war, it supports conventional ground operations. As recent events in Yemen reveal, without conventional forces' protection and intelligence gathering, SOF cannot operate effectively.

Examples of US conventional military power employed in the Philippines, numerous incursions into Latin America from the 19th-20th centuries, and Connecticut's success in the Great Narragansett War (King Philip's War), all demonstrate how conventional power with competent local allies can defeat insurgents such as ISIS. Competent military power, less concerned with legitimacy, nation building, law enforcement, and financial warfare, did succeed in these cases, and would again, if the United States were to unleash it in the Levant today.

The Author Replies

Paul Rexton Kan

I am not sure the diligent people at the US Department of Treasury would take kindly in having their efforts to combat ISIS labeled as “sideshows.” Be they Clausewitzian or not, their efforts to damage ISIS’s ability to operate and form a functioning state are in the best keeping of the American tradition of using all of our instruments of national power to defeat an enemy.

There is little in my article suggesting a conventional military campaign would be ineffectual against ISIS; nor is there any suggestion that COIN is the only option. In fact, winning hearts and minds may be more distracting than going after bank accounts and bottom lines. To imply my article recommends the United States and its partners “arrest” and “incarcerate” members of ISIS in Syria and Iraq is a facile interpretation. As the recent Special Forces raid in Syria that killed Abu Sayyaf attests—there was little need to Mirandize the purportedly central figure in ISIS’s economic organization in order to hurt ISIS. Does Major Warren suggest the information gained from the raid on the inner workings of ISIS and its finances be discarded, or the raid itself should have been shelved in favor of some sort of conventional campaign? Is he recommending the US forego its current efforts to cripple the illicit financial networks that underpin ISIS’s power?

Major Warren implies the strategic choices when employing an integrated financial and military strategy are binary rather than complementary. Using financial tools against a foe does not immediately lead to COIN (or to nation-building) or preclude a conventional military approach. The choice is not a binary one—it’s not “tanks or banks.” A conventional military approach can also include a component of economic warfare waged against a proto-state like ISIS. The history of conventional wars is also the history of embargoes and sanctions that were part and parcel of a broader strategy to bring down an adversary.

The notion that conventional fighting alone can be credited for the small set of examples Major Warren lists at the end of his commentary is a narrow approach for what is clearly a broader problem. Although history is not my discipline, I am fairly certain the enemies in those wars did not use illicit financing to pay for online propaganda and internet recruitment efforts to draw more foreigners into the fray, or to pay for expanding their franchise to countries in other continents.

If, as Major Warren argues, “Victory is achievable through the employment of conventional forces accompanied by competent local allies, such as the Kurds,” then I am confused. I believe the US Air Force is a conventional force that has already been employed along with the Kurds against ISIS targets in the current campaign. The Iraqi military and moderate Syrian rebels may not be “competent local allies” in the eyes of Major Warren; but, it is unfortunate that he should discard “training and officer exchanges” because he believes they represent how social science has “overly influenced military doctrine.” Perhaps

his commentary is merely an argument for a larger role for conventional US ground forces in an expanded war across both Syria and Iraq. Should policy makers decide to accept such an escalation, the ensuing campaign could also be augmented by a financial strategy to weaken ISIS. The successful ground operations against Hussein's Iraq followed years of sanctions and the tracing of his regime's illicit finances. These economic efforts hobbled Iraq's ability to replace military equipment and train its forces, contributing to coalition military operations against the increasingly economically fragile nation.

To be sure, an integrated military and financial strategy is not a tonic for ill-conceived policy choices. However, the inclusion of financial efforts in whatever types of wars the United States wages—COIN or conventional or some mixture—against a foe like ISIS should not be removed from serious strategic discussions.