

Rethinking Western Approaches to Counterinsurgency: Lessons from Post-Colonial Conflict

by Russell W. Glenn

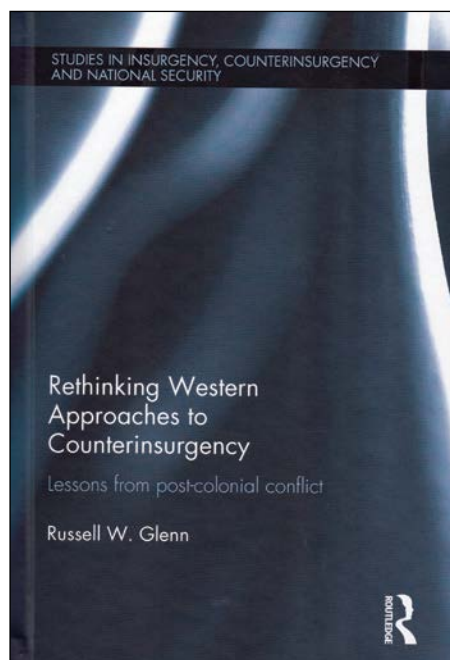
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Reviewed by Howard G. Coombs

Dr. Russ Glenn's *Rethinking Western Approaches to Counterinsurgency: Lessons from Post-Colonial Conflict* demonstrates that the lessons of the past need careful re-thinking when considering modern counterinsurgency. He uses eight case studies of recent insurgencies to show the need to thoroughly study the circumstances of any conflict in order to garner relevant examples and to avoid being reductionist with the results of that process. These analyses aptly illustrate Glenn's contention that "each [post-colonial] counterinsurgency is unique, the nature of its challenges being dispersed



across a broad palette of environments, societies, and threats even within the confines of a single country." (p. 222).

Glenn does acknowledge the usefulness of studying the post-Second World War colonial counterinsurgencies, but points out that when one scrutinizes them in detail, there are many practices unusable to the post-colonial counterinsurgent. For example, Malaya (1948-1960), often cited by most students of military history when discussing success in battling an insurgency, highlights the routine use of: (1) forced resettlement, (2) collective punishment, (3) detention without trial, (4) deportation, and (5) execution, as useful tools. Despite that, some lessons of Malaya are still applicable, such as the need for a comprehensive inter-agency approach to fighting the insurgent.

There is much to absorb in *Rethinking Western Approaches to Counterinsurgency*. The examples of Chechnya and Sri Lanka demonstrate that military force can suppress insurgencies in the near-to-medium term, and sometimes longer. At the other end of the scale, the study of the counterinsurgency in the Southern Philippines show the positive results of a diminished use of force by the American-advised Armed Forces of the Philippines. Building upon that example, an examination

of Northern Ireland advocates not only restraint in the use of force, but also “perseverance.” In the next case study, that of Sierra Leone, Glenn illustrates how independent funding can prolong an insurgency that does not have public support. Following from that, the Solomon Islands provide an instance of the challenges posed to a successful counterinsurgency after military victory, when the indigenous national administration is not providing effective governance. Another perspective is given through examination of the exigencies of battling a criminal insurgency in Columbia that, at one point, controlled over 50 percent of the country. Lastly, the example of the Al Anbar “Awakening” in Iraq demonstrates what can take place when the population rises against groups that they formerly supported, and how these counterinsurgency effects can spread. Throughout this examination, it is clearly evident that in order to optimize the possibility of success, actions by the counterinsurgent, supporting agencies, and the supported government should be coordinated and inclusive.

From these studies, Glenn derives nine revised beliefs that assist greatly in framing an understanding of post-colonial counterinsurgency. These cover the utility of military force, whether gaining “hearts and minds” has primacy in counterinsurgency, the endurance of this form of conflict, support to the host nation government, the importance of patience, the role of democratic government, the relevancy of past practice, the dangers of militias, and a need to increase social resilience, vice physical infrastructure, as part of counterinsurgency. In combination with these beliefs, he also identifies a number of corollaries, observations, and thoughts that further enrich his research.

Additionally, this scrutiny enables Glenn to provide a refined definition of contemporary insurgency. He writes that insurgencies can be understood as “an organized movement seeking to replace or undermine all or part of the sovereign authority exercised by one or more constituted governments through the protracted use of subversion and armed conflict.” (p. 8). This definition provides a reader with a nuanced delineation of counterinsurgency that takes into account the wide range of circumstances evidenced by the eight case studies presented in the book, and it is useful in creating understanding and communicating ideas pertaining to such current fighting.

Rethinking Western Approaches to Counterinsurgency is an innovative and meticulously researched look at the distinctions of modern counterinsurgency. Its contents prompt the reader to muse upon the nature of both insurgencies and counterinsurgencies. The case studies are authoritative, well written, and integrated with each other. Together with the methodology shown in these chapters, the themes that Glenn has brought out provide a basis by which one can scrutinize post-colonial counterinsurgency and develop a fulsome understanding. This book would be invaluable to any who have an interest in contemporary conflict studies and counterinsurgency. Thankfully the relatively affordable cost of the e-version allows those who would be interested in reading *Rethinking Western Approaches to Counterinsurgency* to purchase their own copy of what is sure to be a much sought after work.

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