



**A Question of Command:  
Counterinsurgency from the  
Civil War to Iraq**

By Mark Moyar

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Reviewed by

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Of the many military historians who have examined the art and science of battlefield leadership, few can match the accomplishments of John Keegan, who is perhaps best known for *The Face of Battle* (1976). Keegan's analysis has proven relevant over decades of evolving conflict and remains instructive to this day. In 1988, Keegan produced an equally important analysis of generalship in times of conflict. In *The Mask of Command*, he examines the evolving nature of wartime leadership and posits that a confluence of factors—among them, societal norms and technology—influences the nature of command and ultimately affects the manner in which leaders make decisions. Now, over two decades later, Mark Moyar offers *A Question of Command*, a counterargument to Keegan's analysis of counterinsurgency warfare. Moyar extracts 10 attributes of effective counterinsurgency leadership from a historical analysis of 150 years of conflict, and in doing so, applies what Keegan refers to as the *traits method of analysis*—a notion that universally applied common characteristics can determine success or failure on the frontlines of battle.

The premise behind Moyar's analysis is that counterinsurgency is, above all else, leader-centric warfare. Moyar defines effective leadership through his "ten attributes of effective counterinsurgency leaders"—initiative, flexibility, creativity, judgment, empathy, charisma, sociability, dedication, integrity, and organization—which he highlights in accounts of nine counterinsurgency campaigns. Moyar's analysis covers the full spectrum of counterinsurgency conflict throughout history, which is evident in the equal attention given to the more studied, modern campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq and the lesser known conflicts of post-Civil War Reconstruction, the Philippine insurrection of 1899, and the Salvadoran insurgency in the early 1980s. Moyar concludes the book with a chapter titled "How to Win," in which he seeks to provide a roadmap for the military to use in its recruitment and development of future leaders.

While noble in its efforts and interesting in its content, the book has limited success in achieving its purpose. Moyar states from the outset that his analysis aims to assist counterinsurgents in the execution of their mission, yet the overall purpose is lost in the intervening pages where he delves into the historical minutiae of each counterinsurgency campaign. Broadly speaking, history is central to any effective analysis of battlefield command, and Moyar acknowledges such in his sweeping account of counterinsurgency warfare. However, this book offers much more history than analysis, which ultimately mutes its bottom line and leaves the reader grasping for clear examples of Moyar's 10 attributes in practice.

Through his description of 18 Civil War officers and their experiences in combat,

the detailed background of Filipino political personalities and movements in the 1950s, and his rehashing of the all-too-familiar history of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq, Moyar proves that less can often be more. Additionally, the author claims a level of exclusivity for his idea of leader-centric warfare in his opening chapter, and ultimately takes the "gospel" of counterinsurgency doctrine to task. Specifically, Moyar writes that Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, makes no mention of "empowering quality American or host-nation commanders" and therefore fails to address a central tenet of counterinsurgency warfare. While Moyar may be technically correct in his assertion, it is a stretch to intimate that U.S. Army doctrine does not advocate empowerment at all levels of command. To be sure, FM 3-24 clearly endorses the concept of decentralization in its opening chapter under the principle "Empower the Lowest Levels." More to the point, in the 3 years between the publication of FM 3-24 and Moyar's book, it has become abundantly clear that empowering American and host nation leaders in the execution of counterinsurgency operations is a cornerstone of not only the Nation's strategy, but also the military's education and training programs.

To his credit, Moyar calls to mind the importance of sound leadership at all levels of command, and in doing so, reinforces a bedrock tenet of warfare for the contemporary student. However, this book could be more fittingly described as a history of counterinsurgency conflict rather than the playbook that the author intends. After all, using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator to select counterinsurgency leaders does not exactly fit a timely purpose—which, in Moyar's own words, is "to assist

counterinsurgents in Iraq . . . [and] in Afghanistan."

If there is one widely acknowledged lesson to emerge from Iraq and Afghanistan, it is that counterinsurgency warfare is difficult. It is an exercise in physical and mental willpower for the leader on the ground, who is required to motivate, think, plan, articulate, learn, and adapt at a constant pace. In the end, though, the ability of a leader to do all of these things is often not enough. David Kilcullen states as much in his book *Counterinsurgency*, where he unearths two historical trends that have often made the difference between victory and defeat. Kilcullen found overwhelming evidence to indicate that, first, fighting in one's own country provides a marked advantage, and second, success in counterinsurgency often depends on a willingness to negotiate with the enemy. Kilcullen's argument is instructive in that it softens Moyar's claim that effective leadership is the most important aspect of defeating an insurgency. To be sure, achieving tactical, operational, and strategic goals in a counterinsurgency campaign requires a host of factors to work in harmony. Among these are effective police forces, a viable host nation government, and, indeed, competent military leaders on the frontlines. In the end, *A Question of Command* is a thoughtful analysis from which we all can learn, but Moyar's notion of leader-centric doctrine addresses only part of the solution to an enormously complex problem, and, therefore, is not the panacea that he claims it to be. **JFQ**

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