



Gangs, Pseudo-Militaries, and Other Modern Mercenaries: New Dynamics in Uncomfortable Wars

By Max G. Manwaring

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Famed counterinsurgency analyst Max G. Manwaring extends his research into the subject of “uncomfortable wars” in his newest book, *Gangs, Pseudo-Militaries, and Other Modern Mercenaries*. As Edwin C. Corr notes in the foreword, Manwaring focuses on the “asymmetrical, irregular . . . nonstate actors” he collectively terms *gangs*. Highly diverse in their size, sophistication, capacity and propensity for violence, relationships with state actors, and objects, these gangs range from old-fashioned guerrillas to paramilitary and vigilante organizations, from propaganda-agitator cells to criminal organizations of a great many kinds. However, they have in common their endeavoring to overthrow, capture, or simply weaken individual states or the state system as a whole to attain their goals, and in the process, their becoming the principal war-making entities of our era.

After establishing the issue and its importance in his preface, introduction, and first chapter (supplemented by John F. Fishel’s historical survey of the issue in an afterword), Manwaring moves on to the five chapters of case studies of gangs that comprise the core of the book. These studies examine the impact of Argentine “*piqueteros*” on the country’s domestic politics; the role of Colombia’s gang problem in a security situation dominated by an “unholy trinity” of insurgent, paramilitary, and drug trafficker activity; Venezuela’s “use of popular militias and other instruments of power” to develop a regional hegemony

capable of challenging the United States; al Qaeda’s activities in Western Europe; and Mexico’s private armies, in particular the Zetas, respectively.

There is much to be said for Manwaring’s study. While terrorism and guerrilla warfare and the like have long been the subjects of a vast literature, there has been little effort to examine many of the other kinds of nonstate actors he discusses in comprehensive ways. Additionally, as Manwaring himself points out, “strategic theory and action have played little part in the debate and actions involving contemporary irregular warfare as a whole.” The book is refreshing on both counts, examining this underexplored territory in depth, and not only demonstrating the applicability of strategic literature, old and new (from Sun Tzu, Machiavelli, and Clausewitz, to Lenin and Mao, to Rupert Smith) to the subject, but also effectively applying it to individual case studies and the broader situation and charting out possible responses.

Unfortunately, the book suffers from a number of weaknesses. Some are comparatively minor, like a jargon-heavy prose style and a tendency to make extensive use of terms with multiple, politically charged, and contentious definitions in unconventional and unfamiliar ways (as with his use of *democratic socialism* and *neopopulism*), though I found that Manwaring always managed to make his essential points clear in the end. Another weakness is a propensity for understating the response of the United States and its allies to particular threats, as when the author suggests that Washington’s support to Bogota has focused exclusively on the drug war (neglecting the country’s insurgency), and claims that al Qaeda has been treated as a law enforcement problem.

A deeper issue is the book’s methodology, about which I have some reservations. The most important of these is that all five of the case studies concern ongoing conflicts. That they are not resolved complicates their assessment in ways that would not be the case with wars or other situations where the analyst can examine ultimate outcomes. Related to this is Manwaring’s tendency to emphasize the most grandiose aspirations of the actors he examines rather than actual events to date, and to take the feasibility of those aspirations as a given, rather than critically assessing the actors’ capabilities to realize those aspirations. This is most pronounced in his assessment of Venezuela,

though it is also prominent in his chapter on al Qaeda. (Manwaring classifies al Qaeda as a “hegemonic” actor. While such a classification may reflect its aspirations, this says nothing about its actual capabilities or their limits.)

Fortunately, the book’s other three case studies are more solidly grounded, and the chapters on Argentina, Colombia, and Mexico are far more robust, lucidly elaborating the tangled domestic situations in those countries. Additionally, the concluding chapter distills the lessons of Manwaring’s examinations and suggests an abstract but logical foundation for a theory to counter such actors emphasizing legitimate governance, the use of “soft” as well as “hard” power, and a unity of effort among the components involved (as war is now best thought of as a “sociopolitical matter,” in which force is just one instrument). Manwaring also works to link such action with a proposed grand strategy that would move American policy from “short-term self-protection,” “short-term compassion,” and “cosmetics” conducted through “ad hoc, negative and reactive crisis management” responses strongly characterized by “military tactical-operational level” action to pursuit of “an organized and effectively enforced system of general international peace.”

Most of this is a restatement of old principles, but the recognition that these principles apply to the irregular warfare conventional military and political theorists have regarded as beneath acknowledgement is one of Manwaring’s principal contentions, and on the whole he is successful in demonstrating the point. As a result, the book usefully extends some worthwhile lines of recent thought and lays some foundations for future work, making it a meaningful if imperfect contribution to the underdeveloped literature on its subject. **JFQ**

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