



Blood Year: The Unraveling of Western Counterterrorism

By David Kilcullen

Oxford University Press, 2016

288 pp. \$24.95

ISBN: 978-0190600549

Reviewed by Thomas C. Greenwood

Students of strategy and defense policy who have closely tracked the war on terror since 9/11 will find David Kilcullen's new book both enlightening and discouraging. It is enlightening because he carefully weaves years of field study, scholarly research, and thoughtful analysis into a compelling work that is rich in insights and brutally honest in its judgments. Yet it is discouraging nonetheless. After taking the reader on a rich journey through the rise and fall of al Qaeda, the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), an analysis of the inconclusive campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, the collapse of order in the Middle East, the brutal civil war in Syria, and the largest dislocation of refugees since World War II, he offers the reader few policy recommendations on how we might rediscover strategic clarity and advance U.S. national inter-

ests in a multigenerational war against violent extremism.

Reader alert: this is not a feel-good book for military officers, civil servants, or government officials (of either party) who want to rationalize the Iraq War and its putative contributions to the broader global counterterrorism campaign. Kilcullen calls Iraq “the greatest strategic screw-up since Hitler’s invasion of Russia,” and the start of a great strategic unravelling that continues unabated today. As he puts it, “The West’s strategy after 9/11—derailed by the invasion of Iraq, exacerbated by our addiction to killing terrorist leaders, hastened by precipitate withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan, opportunism in Libya, and passivity in the face of catastrophe in Syria—carried the seeds of disaster within it. And until that strategy changes, those disasters will continue.” This from a man who advised General David Petraeus in Iraq and served as counselor to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. On this note, readers looking for a primer on how to speak truth to power will not be disappointed. Kilcullen is unsparing in his criticism of senior leaders, U.S. partners, and those who believe selective strategic engagement (my terms, not his) versus active containment (his words) is possible in a world without drawbridges.

Kilcullen quickly hooks the reader by recalling the capture of Mosul, Iraq’s second-largest city, by ISIL in June 2014, a mere 12 days after President Barack Obama announced to West Point cadets that they might be the first class since 9/11 not to see combat in Iraq or Afghanistan. Kilcullen is perplexed, if not aghast, that the President thought the war against al Qaeda was largely over. President Obama, in fact, failed to mention ISIL—the new threat that was already wreaking havoc in Syria, Iraq, and the broader Middle East—a single time in his speech. How could any commander in chief with the largest intelligence apparatus in the world be so naïve about an ongoing conflict?

The West Point speech serves as Kilcullen’s backdrop for one of the book’s key observations: leaving a war is not the same as winning it. He posits

that the United States has lost its will, commitment, and sense of collective sacrifice for the latter. But what “victory” looks like in this age of global insurgency remains as elusive in the real world as it does in the book.

Nevertheless, Kilcullen is at his best when sharing his strategic thoughts, which are presented around five major themes.

Kilcullen contends that by 2005 the United States should have been in full stride implementing a counterterrorism “disaggregation” strategy that he helped write. The strategy’s core tenet was that the defeat of al Qaeda required linkages between various groups in the al Qaeda global network to be systematically broken by targeting the “central players’ ability to control their franchises, and partner with local governments to defeat threats in their own jurisdictions.” These partnerships would involve “calibrated capacity building” with local governments to help reduce or eliminate preexisting grievances used by al Qaeda to attract recruits and elicit support from sympathetic populations—in other words, nation-building. Kilcullen, however, refrains from calling it that.

The disaggregation strategy was never fully implemented, however, because the twin insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan dominated the policy debate, becoming, in Kilcullen’s words, “a hole in the heart of Western strategy” because it distracted leaders from focusing on other virulent al Qaeda franchises around the world. Perhaps. Given that Iraq and Afghanistan were where our troops were engaged, though, it is possible that both countries would have remained the top priorities of the day, receiving a preponderance of attention and resources irrespective of the proclaimed strategy.

Kilcullen also criticizes the tactics and operational design used to fight al Qaeda and ISIL. He argues that the light counterterrorism footprint initially used with success by the George W. Bush administration in Afghanistan was not the correct approach in Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and elsewhere. Why? Because of its over-reliance on the use of unmanned aerial vehicles, surveillance, and raids to

kill or capture high-value targets. Instead, Kilcullen believes more robust ground forces were essential to helping protect local populations from terrorists, training and advising indigenous security forces, and bolstering host-nation capacity for self-governance. In his view, more boots on the ground would have engendered trust-based interpersonal relationships within and among tribes. This would have provided more space for security forces and local governing structures to acquire increased legitimacy with the local populations, thereby marginalizing shadow governments being established by the terrorists.

Kilcullen cites the 2007 Iraq Surge as evidence that light counterterrorism operations are ineffective. He correctly notes that the Surge, rather than the victory it is often portrayed as, was instead a moral and tactical necessity, as Iraq and the United States were unable to convert military success into political stability. Nonetheless, he contends that if the United States had not left Iraq prematurely, a different outcome may have emerged.

This reflects wishful thinking on the author's part because political stability was never attainable so long as Nouri al-Maliki, then the prime minister of Iraq, remained in office as Tehran's surrogate. Furthermore, it is not self-evident how the United States could have deposed him earlier had the decision to do so been made. This is the dark side of counterinsurgency and nation-building: the reliance upon weak or corrupt leaders.

The chapters dealing with an adaptive enemy are among the book's best. Kilcullen describes how ISIL emerged from the ashes of al Qaeda, found sanctuary in Syria, and began waging war to establish its "Caliphate." Equally riveting, however, is his analysis of guerrilla terrorism (that is, infiltrating attackers into a target country rather than organizing and training them first in other countries), urban siege, remote radicalization, and leaderless resistance. Space does not allow for a full dissection, but serious readers will note the evolution of the threat from the days of Osama bin Laden hiding out in a cave in the mountains of Afghanistan

to ISIL's sophisticated use of social media to mobilize mass support.

Moreover, the description of ISIL's warfighting tactics alone is worth the purchase price of the book. Here, Kilcullen is masterful in illustrating the combined arms prowess of an army that employs guerrilla (irregular) operations to entice its enemies to mass into lucrative targets before striking with the speed, shock, and firepower traditionally ascribed to only the best modern ground forces in the West. Given that no military force in the Middle East today is capable of matching ISIL in combined arms operations, by what mechanism do we seal its defeat?

As noted previously, Kilcullen concludes his book with the discouraging (but accurate) assessment that U.S. counterterrorism strategy has failed and a complete re-think is therefore warranted. True enough. And while the insights he outlines in the epilogue serve as useful maxims, they are not realistic policy prescriptions for a nation that has other priorities, including rising strategic powers, to worry about. At the same time, the country remains war weary enough to stay in denial about what will be required to defeat ISIL, and averts its eyes from a humanitarian crisis that threatens European unity. Given these forces at play, any future counterterrorism roadmap should start with the proposition offered by security expert Audrey Cronin: "Wars pursued at odds with political reality cannot be won." To do otherwise risks repeating the folly of the last 15 years. JFQ

Colonel Thomas Greenwood, USMC (Ret.), is on the Editorial Board of *Joint Force Quarterly*. He served 31 years as a Marine Infantry Officer, including in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and has served on the staff of the National Security Council for three Presidents.

New from NDU Press

for the Center for the Study of
Chinese Military Affairs

Strategic Forum 289

*An Empirical Analysis of Claimant
Tactics in the South China Sea*
by Christopher D. Yung and

Patrick
McNulty



China,
Taiwan,
Vietnam, the
Philippines,
Malaysia,
and Brunei
have used

a wide variety of tactics to protect and advance their maritime territorial claims in the South China Sea. China is the most active user of the nine categories of tactics identified in this paper, with the exception of legal actions, and accounts for more than half of all military and paramilitary actions since 1995.

The unclassified database used in this analysis undercounts military and paramilitary actions, but captures enough activity to provide a representative sample. A classified version that captures more activity would improve the potential to develop the database into an Indications and Warning tool to assist in monitoring and managing tensions in the South China Sea.



Visit the NDU Press Web site for
more information on publications
at ndupress.ndu.edu