

2018

The Forgotten Front: Patron-Client Relationships in Counter-Insurgency

Iskander Rehman

Walter C. Ladwig III

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Rehman, Iskander and Ladwig, Walter C. III (2018) "The Forgotten Front: Patron-Client Relationships in Counter-Insurgency," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 71 : No. 3 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol71/iss3/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

troubadour of globalization—argued for a spirit of liberal internationalism that leads logically to efforts at humanitarian intervention. To Mandelbaum, the apparent difference between liberal internationalism and the humanitarian-interventionist approach that some U.S. presidents have chosen is that the United States decided to use its resources to rescue people (metaphorically) rather than to concentrate on defending the global system of economic liberalism. However, how one “defends a system” without intervening in particular crises within that system remains rather unclear. Liberal internationalism supposedly is an antidote to great-power politics, but ultimately Mandelbaum concludes that America’s failure at preserving its beneficial role in the international system (and its interests) was the result of not paying most of its attention to, and sometimes accommodating, the reemerging great powers. The “malign effects” of an angry Russia and a contemptuous China, Mandelbaum writes on his final page, “will be felt long after the failed missions in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, and even Afghanistan and Iraq ha[ve] faded from memory” (p. 381).

SAM J. TANGREDI



The Forgotten Front: Patron-Client Relationships in Counter-Insurgency, by Walter C. Ladwig III. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2017. 360 pages. \$34.99 (paperback).

The advent of a new U.S. presidential administration has resulted in a series of new defense guidance and strategy documents—ranging from the *National Security Strategy* to the *National Defense Strategy* and the *Nuclear Posture*

Review—all of which have placed a clear emphasis on the risks posed by the recrudescence of great-power rivalry. The *National Defense Strategy*, in particular, garnered praise from the national security commentariat for its terse declaration that great-power competition, rather than terrorism, now constituted “the primary focus of U.S. national security.” Indeed, for an American public increasingly weary of costly and protracted counterinsurgency (COIN) campaigns in the Middle East, there was something inherently appealing about this apparent reordering of American defense priorities.

Unfortunately, however, events over the past year have demonstrated repeatedly that this much-touted focal rearrangement is not something that simply can be wished into existence. Indeed, despite running on a platform promising greater disengagement from the Middle East, President Trump has found himself compelled to deploy ever more soldiers to Afghanistan and the Levant. Meanwhile, cabinet officials have suggested that Washington may need to maintain an open-ended military presence in Syria, partly as a means of countering growing Iranian influence. Last but not least, the deadly ambush of a unit of U.S. special operations forces (SOFs) in the deserts of Niger revealed to many baffled American citizens the full extent of their nation’s global counterterrorism footprint: eight thousand SOFs active on any given day in more than eighty countries.

All this underscores the need for U.S. security managers to continue to plan for and debate extended counterterrorism and stabilization campaigns—however much they may pine privately for a post-COIN era. It also renders Ladwig’s recent

book—which engages in a thoughtful and historically informed study of the patron-client relationship in irregular warfare and counterinsurgency—all the more timely. Dr. Ladwig, a professor in the Department of War Studies at King’s College London, has provided an erudite and intellectually stimulating book, one that does a fine job of shedding light on some of the shortcomings of the more recent COIN literature.

Ladwig’s central premise is that one of the assumptions at the heart of recent American writings on COIN—that a security patron and its client will enjoy a variety of shared goals and interests—is misplaced. “In fact,” he notes, “the historical record suggests that maintaining power is frequently a competing priority for an incumbent regime, which means that many of the standard reform prescriptions for counterinsurgency—streamlining the military chain of command, ending patronage politics, engaging in economic reform, and embracing disaffected minority groups—can appear as threatening to a besieged government and its supporters as the insurgency itself.” When dealing with regional partners—particularly those afflicted with nepotism, deeply factionalized internal power structures, and tense civil-military relations—there always will be a strong potential for strategic misalignment or dyssynchrony, or both.

Paying attention to a client’s inner travails and patterns of dysfunction is only the first step, however, in convincing it to conform to U.S. wishes. Ladwig outlines two archetypal “influence strategies” that patron states traditionally have employed as a means of persuading their junior partners to enact more-effective and convergent

policies. The first, *inducement*, aims to reassure and win over the client with generous flows of aid and unqualified professions of U.S. support. The second approach, *conditionality*, takes more of a “tough love” approach: calibrating and rationing U.S. support in accordance with the client’s ability or willingness to cooperate and deliver.

The book contains three detailed historical case studies of past U.S. support efforts: one that can be qualified as a success (the Philippines during the Hukbalahap Rebellion, from 1946 to 1954); one that is an all-too-well-known failure (South Vietnam under Ngô Đình Diệm, from 1955 to 1963); and one that falls somewhere in between (El Salvador during the 1979–91 civil war). Each case study is richly textured, drawing on extensive archival research and declassified government materials. Given enough potential material for three books, the author was wise to select these three cases to juxtapose; they provide a useful kaleidoscopic study of the successes and failures of U.S. foreign internal defense (FID) policies during the Cold War.

Unsurprisingly, the author notes that there are no simple solutions to the issues that traditionally have plagued patron-client relationships. FID always winds up being a more complex and challenging undertaking than originally planned. That said, policies of conditionality—which “require making credible threats to a client and careful managing of commitments”—are clearly preferable to policies of pure inducement, which not only are ineffective but can have pernicious second-order effects. The challenge is to maintain a degree of strategic consistency while devising conditionality-based

approaches that can survive not only different administrations and electoral cycles but interagency differences and bureaucratic turf wars.

One of this reviewer's only regrets is that—barring a few segments in the introduction and conclusion—the author chooses not to apply his findings to the study of more-contemporary COIN campaigns. Dr. Ladwig has acquired a reputation in the field of South Asia studies for his careful, methodical approach to the region's security challenges, and it would have been useful for the reader to get a better sense of his take on the past, present, and future of U.S. policy on Afghanistan. It also might have been interesting to explore the challenges that come with more-multidirectional proxy wars, such as that currently unfolding in Syria, which involves multiple potential clients and competing “candidate patron” states, ranging from Turkey to Russia and Iran. These are all minor quibbles, however, and ones that Ladwig no doubt can address in a follow-on study, should he wish to do so.

All in all, this is an excellent and well-timed contribution. Moreover, despite being an academic work, it also is an example of the virtues of the more interdisciplinary, even subtle, approach to security studies embraced by European institutions such as King's College. Drawing not only on well-researched history but on other social sciences such as economic theory, *The Forgotten Front* is refreshingly jargon-free and clearly written, thus making it an ideal study companion for readers of the *Naval War College Review*.

ISKANDER REHMAN



Anatomy of Failure: Why America Loses Every War It Starts, by Harlan Ullman. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2017. 272 pages. \$29.95.

When former Secretaries of State General Colin Powell and John Kerry and former Supreme Allied Commander Europe Marine general Jim Jones (for whom I worked when I commanded the International Security Assistance Force [ISAF] in Afghanistan when it expanded across the whole country) call Harlan Ullman's *Anatomy of Failure* a must-read, people should pay attention. And for those who worry about policy books being boring, *House of Cards* creator Michael, Lord Dobbs deems *Anatomy*, in another blurb, a combination of the works of best-selling thriller novelist Tom Clancy and Carl von Clausewitz. All are correct.

In the interests of full disclosure, the writer and I have been friends and colleagues since my time at ISAF. As Britain's Chief of the General Staff and then Chief of the Defence Staff, I worked with Ullman on many issues. Irrespective of this, *Anatomy* is essential reading for practitioners and students of foreign, defense, and national security policy.

The book's center of gravity is the asking and answering of the vital question of why, since World War II, America arguably has lost all the wars it started and has failed in military interventions in which it did not have just cause to participate. This question alone directly challenges the accepted view in Washington that America has the best and most formidable military in the world. If that is the case, despite some stunning tactical successes, why, at the strategic level, has its record in