

Preface: Militarism and Humanitarianism

This dossier explores some of the ways that contemporary practices of development and humanitarianism have recently come to interpenetrate with military activities. In recent years, counterinsurgency, reconstruction, and aid have all emerged as important elements of contemporary military strategy, drawing on the concepts and tools of emergency care and socioeconomic development. At the same time, the benefits associated with both humanitarianism and development (healthcare, shelter, food, improved economic growth, welfare, opportunity, and personal choice) are increasingly framed as imperatives for achieving security. Given this practical overlap in goals and operations on the ground, it is not always easy to distinguish between militarism, humanitarianism, and development. This dossier asks: What are the consequences of such new configurations, formations, and alliances?

Seen from the vantage point of modernist conceptions of warfare, the confluence of the military with the humanitarian might seem a surprising one. Accounts of the rise of humanitarian thinking and action often depict the humanitarian as the conceptual and practical polar opposite of warfare—a salve and a guard against the horrors of war.¹ “War is cruelty,” U.S. general William Tecumseh Sherman remarked in his memoirs. “There’s no use trying to reform it. The crueller it is, the sooner it will be over.”² The so-called total wars of the twentieth century, which aimed at securing victory by destroying civilian infrastructure and populations, were seen by both pacifists and proponents of this way of war as the very opposite of the humanitarian’s ethic of kindness, benevolence, and commitment to reduce suffering and respect the sanctity of individual life. From the point of view of most mid-twentieth-century observers, the notion of “humanitarian war” would have seemed close to oxymoronic.

Yet total war from another perspective may be less the norm than the anomaly. As the essays in this dossier each show in distinct ways, another tradition of nineteenth- and twentieth-century warfare, the colonial tradition of war as a means to subdue and reform a subject people, has provided an important precedent for today’s dominant mode of partial warfare that aims not for the total capitulation of a political opponent but rather to win the sympathies of a contested population. While some colonial wars aimed at the annihilation of the subject populations—from the Black Hawk War of 1832 in the United States to the Herero War (1904–7) in German Southwest Africa—other colonial wars sought more moderate solutions to the challenge of rebellion, solutions not infrequently justified at least in part by references to emergent humani-

tarian ethics.³ All the wars waged by today's great powers in the global south continue this latter historical tradition of warfare.

In scrutinizing the contemporary intersection of humanitarianism and militarism, the dossier of essays included here focuses little on how discourses and rhetorics of humanitarianism or development are used to justify military action (an important but analytically distinct set of questions). Instead, the essays concentrate with special intensity on how developmental and humanitarian “technologies” are being implemented in conjunction with military force (and vice versa). The tightening of the relationship between humanitarianism and the military has taken a variety of different forms. First, Western militaries in the post-9/11 era have emerged as crucial vectors for delivering “humanitarian” or “developmental” benefits, including basic services such as infrastructure, education, and healthcare, both in war zones and in the aftermath of natural disasters. Second, nonmilitary humanitarians have increasingly had to rely on protection from military forces in order to conduct their business in places like Afghanistan or central Africa, as they would otherwise become targets for predators or those opposed to the secular force of their interventions. Third, Western militaries have increasingly begun to try to appropriate knowledge and technology traditionally seen as useful mainly for “development” or humanitarian purposes as instruments of warcraft.

Each of the essays in this dossier takes up different versions of these configurations, helping to put the contemporary interdigitation of militarism and humanitarianism into firmer contextual and historical view. All of them focus, more specifically, on the topic of counterinsurgency (COIN), the old Vietnam-era concept that has found an extraordinary second act since the middle of the 2000s, as Western militaries have found themselves confronted with ongoing and seemingly intractable low-intensity conflicts, namely, in Iraq and Afghanistan—the two critical battlespaces of what George Bush first labeled the Global War on Terror but which has more recently been rebranded as “the long war.”⁴ For all the authors in this dossier, COIN doctrine and practice stand in contrast to what Ben Oppenheim calls “suppression campaigns,” forms of total war that aim to cow enemy populations through displays of shocking, awesome force. While COIN hardly avoids violence, it uses it in a more discriminating manner than that of either total war or suppression campaigns. The instrumentality of violence under COIN is calibrated not to induce pervasive fear but rather to “contain the insurgency . . . so that the state can provide better governance and development.” As such, COIN is taken by all of the authors as emblematic of the turn toward more humanitarian forms of militarism.

Dena Plemmons and Robert Albrow have been deeply involved in anthropology's efforts in the United States to develop disciplinary guidelines for how and when anthropologists can engage with the military. Their essay offers an important reframing of one of the most controversial instances of humanitarian militarism, namely the U.S. military's Human Terrain System (HTS). HTS was a program that embedded hundreds of anthropologists and other social scientists in combat brigades in Afghanistan between 2006 and 2010. As a component of the broader shift toward COIN, the HTS's point of departure was not only that the ethnographic expertise of the participating social scientists would provide warfighters with a deeper under-

standing of the sociocultural environment (“the human terrain”) in which they were operating. It would also help with the U.S. military’s efforts to win the hearts and minds of truculent Afghans. The American Anthropological Association roundly condemned the HTS in 2007, framing its opprobrium in terms of a rejection of any collaboration between anthropologists and the U.S. national security state.

Plemmons and Albro argue for a more nuanced approach to the ethics of military-social science collaboration. Skeptical about rigid rules to dictate the dos and don’ts of anthropological research, Plemmons and Albro challenge the bright ethical lines that some of their colleagues have tried to draw around different anthropological practices. They point out the irony that many of the practices that the discipline has condemned when performed in the service of military patrons—the promotion of specific political agendas, the use of clandestine research methods to achieve those ends, and the instrumentalization of anthropological knowledge—are celebrated when done on behalf of causes that these same anthropologists prefer, such as the exposure of organ traffickers. What distinguishes these cases, Plemmons and Albro imply, is mainly their political content. Instead of political litmus tests, they propose a “situational” ethics that scrutinizes the “local contexts” of particular research programs.

This discussion of the inherent and ineluctable ethical ambiguities associated with ethnographic research then sets up a brief but trenchant discussion of HTS. Instead of the uniformly rejectionist view of working with the U.S. military on behalf of national security objectives that some of their fellow anthropologists advocate, Plemmons and Albro build a narrower but perhaps more damning case against the HTS. The problem with HTS was not the collaboration between anthropologists and the military per se, they argue, but rather the specifics of the HTS program: that the HTS team members had no control over how the data they collected was used; that there was no effort to protect the confidentiality of informants; that the human subjects were framed less as morally autonomous human beings than as topographic objects (parts of the “human terrain”). All of these features sat uneasily with the broader objective of having the anthropologists there to help promote the projection of “soft power” into the region. In other words, Plemmons and Albro suggest that the reason to condemn HTS is not because all social scientific work on behalf of the U.S. military is bad, but on the narrower grounds that HTS was a poorly conceived program, one whose “basic purpose . . . remains unclear.” In sum, Plemmons’s and Albro’s view of HTS recalls the famous remark attributed to Talleyrand concerning Napoleon’s judicial murder of the Duc d’Enghein: “C’est pire qu’un crime; c’est une faute.”

Keally McBride’s and Annick Wibben’s contribution takes up a different dimension of the U.S. military’s attempt to engage the Afghani population, the so-called Female Engagement Teams (FETs) whose muddled goals reflect the same basic ambiguity of purpose that Plemmons and Albro condemn with respect to the HTS. A dissection of the FET program becomes the vehicle for a broader exploration of the gendering of contemporary counterinsurgency doctrine and strategy. Whereas warfighting in the annihilationist mode advocated by a William Tecumseh Sherman and his successors has traditionally been conceived as the ultimate “hypermasculine” activity, COIN is instead positioned as a kinder, gentler form of warfare that in a

variety of ways serves to mark the West's "civilizational superiority." For example, the wars in which COIN has been actively deployed, notably Afghanistan, have been framed as wars in defense of women's rights. Indeed, many Western feminists cheered the initial campaign in Afghanistan in 2001 on precisely the grounds that it would serve to liberate Afghani women from the "medieval backwardness" of the Taliban, which insisted on the strictest form of veiling and worked actively to stop girls from learning how to read. While such humanitarian motives might seem unimpeachable, McBride and Wibben point out that the defense of the rights of native women against the patriarchal structures of the occupied society was also a staple justification for colonialism (and thus wars of colonial oppression), from the British effort to suppress the always rare practice of suttee (wife-burning) in India, to the French campaigns against the veiling of women in North Africa. In each case, Western military domination was justified as a defense of local women's humanity and rights.

With this setup, McBride and Wibben then offer a dissection of the FET program today. The Female Engagement Teams were initially conceived as a mechanism for allowing the U.S. military to "reach" the females in the target population, working around the taboo against native female contact with non-native males. Like the HTS, the goal of the FET was both to collect better intelligence about the subject population (in this case, focusing on local women as informants) and to deliver hearts-and-minds-winning services such as education and medical care to local women, who were cast as crucial stakeholders in the campaign to convince the target population to abandon support for the insurgency. While the effectiveness of the FETs in helping to undermine the insurgency is uncertain, McBride and Wibben argue that the FETs have been quite useful as a propaganda tool for convincing Western audiences not only that the United States is promoting innovative new strategies to gain the upper hand against the Taliban but also that the West's greater respect for women, embodied in its willingness to integrate women into its military, is a key source of differentiated strength in the inconclusive battle against Taliban backwardness. The FETs are thus positioned as an example both of American sensitivity to the cultural norms of the Afghans and as an example of Western superiority because of the U.S. military's willingness to field female soldiers. At the same time, the FETs reinforce the notion of a "women's sphere" in the name of an allegedly feminist agenda.

The counterinsurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq also form the tableau for Colleen Bell's essay, though she is less interested in operational matters than in the language of counterinsurgency, specifically the use of metaphors of disease. Bell argues that while COIN adopts a language of humanitarianism and development, its methods represent more of a "cultural turn" than an "ethical turn" in military interventionism. Although operationalizing COIN requires a greater knowledge of local cultures in order to make locals and insurgents more "predictable," COIN doctrine envisions cultural knowledge production less as a means of promoting "diversity and cultural understanding as an end in itself" than "as a vehicle for attaining military dominance and social control." Just as McBride and Wibben point out that COIN's turn to more "feminine" modes of engagement with the subject population does not undo traditional gender roles or international power relations, so Bell points out that the "cultural turn" reinscribes the "otherness" of the subject population while denying

any Western need to accommodate the demands and requirements of these others. Western culture remains “positioned as the default norm against which other ways of being and other realities are measured.”

One virtue of Bell’s essay is its careful scrutiny of how specific metaphors in works like the U.S. Army’s *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* and David Kilcullen’s *The Accidental Guerrilla* work to reinforce existing power dynamics.⁵ Echoing Walt Rostow’s half-century-old description of communist insurgencies as a “disease of the transition” to modernity, contemporary COIN theory and doctrine depict insurgencies as the result of a “syndrome” that requires a series of metaphorically medical interventions: first, “stop the bleeding”; then, offer “inpatient care and recovery”; and finally, “outpatient care—movement to self-sufficiency.” Bell points out that these tropes depict the body politic of the subject population as a sort of agency-less flesh that requires the expertise of outsiders to diagnose and apply the appropriate treatments, including isolating the “infected” elements (the insurgents) and “immunizing” the “uninfected” population at large. This conceptualization implicitly positions the counterinsurgent as an external expert, not responsible for the infection in the first place, and capable of generating solutions through the “knowledge and management of the host population” via social scientific inquiry. Bell thus goes a step further than Albrow and Plemmons, who hold open the possibility that social scientific collaboration with the military *could* in principle be viable and useful, to instead suggest that such efforts are doomed by the predominant use of the master metaphor of disease to characterize the militant other, which has the effect of removing any agency from the target population.

Finally, Ben Oppenheim’s contribution explores how the seemingly innocuous field of Community Development (CD), originally designed to increase government accountability to the people, has come to be seen in conflict zones as a useful adjunct to COIN. What CD and COIN share, he observes, is the objective of extending the *scope* and *legitimacy* of the state, albeit by quite different means. Whereas COIN attempts to impose the state from the top down, via the surgical application of force and the “delivery” of social services and other political goods, CD focuses more on developing a dialogue between the state, aid agencies, and the served population. CD as such *performs* (in the speech-act sense of the term) a democratic function: by offering aid recipients greater voice with respect to both the type and modality of services the government is meant to deliver, CD instantiates a more collaborative, consensual relationship between the government and the population. From that perspective, whereas the explicit goal of COIN is state-building, CD functions more subtly “as a kind of latent state-building.” If COIN is a “kinder, gentler” and more feminine form of war, one that fades into state-building, then CD could almost be construed as a yet kinder, yet gentler form of state-building, one that fades into democracy promotion. Little wonder, then, that CD has for two decades been the highest-growth area for World Bank and USAID efforts across the global south.

Could CD end up being an alternative to COIN in the battlespace of the “long war”? Here the irony becomes richer: Oppenheim observes that while the theoretical bases of these two modes of state-building differ dramatically, such distinctions may not make all that much of a difference in locales subject to insurgency and other forms

of violent resistance to state power. Although CD advocates have assumed that insurgents in conflict zones “will perceive aid as politically neutral,” Oppenheim suggests that the insurgents (as well as the central governments that support these CD programs) understand full well that CD functions as “COIN by other means.” Precisely *because* successful CD programs increase the accountability of the state to the subject population, and therefore presumably increase the loyalty of the population to the state, they are a threat to insurgents who have state-building (or merely state-resisting) aspirations. Given the threat that CD poses to insurgents’ political objectives, it is not surprising that rather than building peace and democracy, CD in some cases ends up exacerbating rather than abating violence, as insurgents use violence to undermine this threat to their agenda. So much for CD as an alternative to COIN.

NOTES

1. David P. Forsythe, *The Humanitarians: The International Committee of the Red Cross* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
2. William Tecumseh Sherman, *Memoirs*, 2 vols. (New York: Webster, 1892), 2:126.
3. Patrick J. Jung, *The Black Hawk War of 1832* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007); A. Dirk Moses, ed., *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008).
4. See, for example, <http://www.longwarjournal.org> (accessed February 12, 2012).
5. U.S. Army and Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, new ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).