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A REPORTER AT LARGE KNOWING THE ENEMY

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Can social scientists redefine the “war on terror”?

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In 1993, a young captain in the Australian Army named David Kilcullen was living among villagers in West Java, as part of an immersion program in the Indonesian language. One day, he visited a local military museum that contained a display about Indonesia’s war, during the nineteen-fifties and sixties, against a separatist Muslim insurgency movement called Darul Islam. “I had never heard of this conflict,” Kilcullen told me recently. “It’s hardly known in the West. The Indonesian government won, hands down. And I was fascinated by how it managed to pull off such a successful counterinsurgency campaign.”

Kilcullen, the son of two left-leaning academics, had studied counterinsurgency as a cadet at Duntroon, the Australian West Point, and he decided to pursue a doctorate in political anthropology at the University of New South Wales. He chose as his dissertation subject the Darul Islam conflict, conducting research over tea with former guerrillas while continuing to serve in the Australian Army. The rebel movement, he said, was bigger than the Malayan Emergency—the twelve-year Communist revolt against British rule, which was finally put down in 1960, and which has become a major point of reference in the military doctrine of counterinsurgency. During the years that Kilcullen worked on his dissertation, two events in Indonesia deeply affected his thinking. The first was the rise—in the same region that had given birth to Darul Islam, and among some of the same families—of a more extreme Islamist movement called Jemaah Islamiya, which became a Southeast Asian affiliate of Al Qaeda. The second was East Timor’s successful struggle for independence from Indonesia. Kilcullen witnessed the former as he was carrying out his field work; he participated in the latter as an infantry-company commander in a United Nations intervention force. The experiences shaped the conclusions about counter-insurgency in his dissertation, which he finished in 2001, just as a new war was about to begin.

“I saw extremely similar behavior and extremely similar problems in an Islamic insurgency in West Java and a Christian-separatist insurgency in East Timor,” he said. “After 9/11, when a lot of people were saying, ‘The problem is Islam,’ I was thinking, It’s something deeper than that. It’s about human social networks and the way that they operate.” In West Java, elements of the failed Darul Islam insurgency—a local separatist movement with mystical leanings—had resumed fighting as Jemaah Islamiya, whose outlook was Salafist and global. Kilcullen said, “What that told me about Jemaah Islamiya is that it’s not about theology.” He went on, “There are elements in human psychological and social makeup that drive what’s happening. The Islamic bit is secondary. This is human behavior in an Islamic setting. This is not ‘Islamic behavior.’ ” Paraphrasing the American political scientist Roger D. Petersen, he said, “People don’t get pushed into rebellion by their ideology. They get pulled in by their social networks.” He noted that all fifteen Saudi hijackers in the September 11th plot had trouble with their fathers. Although radical ideas prepare the way for disaffected young men to become violent jihadists, the reasons they convert, Kilcullen said, are more mundane and familiar: family, friends, associates.

Indonesia’s failure to replicate in East Timor its victory in West Java later influenced Kilcullen’s views about what the Bush Administration calls the “global war on terror.” In both instances, the Indonesian military used the same harsh techniques, including forced population movements, coercion of locals into

security forces, stringent curfews, and even lethal pressure on civilians to take the government side. The reason that the effort in East Timor failed, Kilcullen concluded, was globalization. In the late nineties, a Timorese international propaganda campaign and ubiquitous media coverage prompted international intervention, thus ending the use of tactics that, in the obscure jungles of West Java in the fifties, outsiders had known nothing about. “The globalized information environment makes counterinsurgency even more difficult now,” Kilcullen said.

Just before the 2004 American elections, Kilcullen was doing intelligence work for the Australian government, sifting through Osama bin Laden’s public statements, including transcripts of a video that offered a list of grievances against America: Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, global warming. The last item brought Kilcullen up short. “I thought, Hang on! What kind of jihadist are you?” he recalled. The odd inclusion of environmentalist rhetoric, he said, made clear that “this wasn’t a list of genuine grievances. This was an Al Qaeda *information* strategy.” Ron Suskind, in his book “The One Percent Doctrine,” claims that analysts at the C.I.A. watched a similar video, released in 2004, and concluded that “bin Laden’s message was clearly designed to assist the President’s reelection.” Bin Laden shrewdly created an implicit association between Al Qaeda and the Democratic Party, for he had come to feel that Bush’s strategy in the war on terror was sustaining his own global importance. Indeed, in the years after September 11th Al Qaeda’s core leadership had become a propaganda hub. “If bin Laden didn’t have access to global media, satellite communications, and the Internet, he’d just be a cranky guy in a cave,” Kilcullen said.

In 2004, Kilcullen’s writings and lectures brought him to the attention of an official working for Paul Wolfowitz, then the Deputy Secretary of Defense. Wolfowitz asked him to help write the section on “irregular warfare” in the Pentagon’s “Quadrennial Defense Review,” a statement of department policy and priorities, which was published earlier this year. Under the leadership of Donald Rumsfeld, who resigned in November, the Pentagon had embraced a narrow “shock-and-awe” approach to war-fighting, emphasizing technology, long-range firepower, and spectacular displays of force. The new document declared that activities such as “long-duration unconventional warfare, counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and military support for stabilization and reconstruction efforts” needed to become a more important component of the war on terror. Kilcullen was partly responsible for the inclusion of the phrase “the long war,” which has become the preferred term among many military officers to describe the current conflict. In the end, the Rumsfeld Pentagon was unwilling to make the cuts in expensive weapons systems that would have allowed it to create new combat units and other resources necessary for a proper counterinsurgency strategy.

In July, 2005, Kilcullen, as a result of his work on the Pentagon document, received an invitation to attend a conference on defense policy, in Vermont. There he met Henry Crumpton, a highly regarded official who had supervised the C.I.A.’s covert activities in Afghanistan during the 2001 military campaign that overthrew the Taliban. The two men spent much of the conference talking privately, and learned, among other things, that they saw the war on terror in the same way. Soon afterward, Condoleezza Rice, the Secretary of State, hired Crumpton as the department’s coordinator for counterterrorism, and Crumpton, in turn, offered Kilcullen a job. For the past year, Kilcullen has occupied an office on the State Department’s second floor, as Crumpton’s chief strategist. In some senses, Kilcullen has arrived too late: this year, the insurgency in Iraq has been transformed into a calamitous civil war between Sunnis and Shiites, and his ideas about counterinsurgency are unlikely to reverse the country’s disintegration. Yet radical Islamist movements now extend across the globe, from Somalia to Afghanistan and Indonesia, and Kilcullen—an Australian anthropologist and lieutenant colonel, who is “on loan” to the U.S. government—offers a new way to understand and fight a war that seems to grow less intelligible the longer it goes on.

Kilcullen is thirty-nine years old, and has a wide pink face, a fondness for desert boots, and an

Australian's good-natured bluntness. He has a talent for making everything sound like common sense by turning disturbing explanations into brisk, cheerful questions: "America is very, very good at big, short conventional wars? It's not very good at small, long wars? But it's even worse at big, long wars? And that's what we've got." Kilcullen's heroes are soldier-intellectuals, both real (T. E. Lawrence) and fictional (Robert Jordan, the flinty, self-reliant schoolteacher turned guerrilla who is the protagonist of Hemingway's "For Whom the Bell Tolls"). On his bookshelves, alongside monographs by social scientists such as Max Gluckman and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, is a knife that he took from a militiaman he had just ambushed in East Timor. "If I were a Muslim, I'd probably be a jihadist," Kilcullen said as we sat in his office. "The thing that drives these guys—a sense of adventure, wanting to be part of the moment, wanting to be in the big movement of history that's happening now—that's the same thing that drives me, you know?"

More than three years into the Iraq war and five into the conflict in Afghanistan, many members of the American military—especially those with combat experience—have begun to accept the need to learn the kind of counterinsurgency tactics that it tried to leave behind in Vietnam. On December 15th, the Army and the Marine Corps will release an ambitious new counterinsurgency field manual—the first in more than two decades—that will shape military doctrine for many years. The introduction to the field manual says, "Effective insurgents rapidly adapt to changing circumstances. They cleverly use the tools of the global information revolution to magnify the effects of their actions. . . . However, by focusing on efforts to secure the safety and support of the local populace, and through a concerted effort to truly function as learning organizations, the Army and Marine Corps can defeat their insurgent enemies."

One night earlier this year, Kilcullen sat down with a bottle of single-malt Scotch and wrote out a series of tips for company commanders about to be deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. He is an energetic writer who avoids military and social-science jargon, and he addressed himself intimately to young captains who have had to become familiar with exotica such as "The Battle of Algiers," the 1966 film documenting the insurgency against French colonists. "What does all the theory mean, at the company level?" he asked. "How do the principles translate into action—at night, with the G.P.S. down, the media criticizing you, the locals complaining in a language you don't understand, and an unseen enemy killing your people by ones and twos? How does counterinsurgency actually happen? There are no universal answers, and insurgents are among the most adaptive opponents you will ever face. Countering them will demand every ounce of your intellect." The first tip is "Know Your Turf": "Know the people, the topography, economy, history, religion and culture. Know every village, road, field, population group, tribal leader, and ancient grievance. Your task is to become the world expert on your district." "Twenty-eight Articles: Fundamentals of Company-Level Counterinsurgency"—the title riffs on a T. E. Lawrence insurgency manual from the First World War—was disseminated via e-mail to junior officers in the field, and was avidly read.

Last year, in an influential article in the *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Kilcullen redefined the war on terror as a "global counterinsurgency." The change in terminology has large implications. A terrorist is "a kook in a room," Kilcullen told me, and beyond persuasion; an insurgent has a mass base whose support can be won or lost through politics. The notion of a "war on terror" has led the U.S. government to focus overwhelmingly on military responses. In a counterinsurgency, according to the classical doctrine, which was first laid out by the British general Sir Gerald Templer during the Malayan Emergency, armed force is only a quarter of the effort; political, economic, and informational operations are also required. A war on terror suggests an undifferentiated enemy. Kilcullen speaks of the need to "disaggregate" insurgencies: finding ways to address local grievances in Pakistan's tribal areas or along the Thai-Malay border so that they aren't mapped onto the ambitions of the global jihad. Kilcullen writes, "Just as the Containment strategy was central to the Cold War, likewise a Disaggregation strategy would provide a unifying strategic conception for the war—something that has been lacking to date." As an example of disaggregation, Kilcullen cited the Indonesian province of Aceh, where, after the 2004 tsunami, a radical Islamist organization tried to set up an office and convert a local separatist movement

to its ideological agenda. Resentment toward the outsiders, combined with the swift humanitarian action of American and Australian warships, helped to prevent the Acehnese rebellion from becoming part of the global jihad. As for America, this success had more to do with luck than with strategy. Crumpton, Kilcullen's boss, told me that American foreign policy traditionally operates on two levels, the global and the national; today, however, the battlefields are also regional and local, where the U.S. government has less knowledge and where it is not institutionally organized to act. In half a dozen critical regions, Crumpton has organized meetings among American diplomats, intelligence officials, and combat commanders, so that information about cross-border terrorist threats is shared. "It's really important that we define the enemy in narrow terms," Crumpton said. "The thing we should not do is let our fears grow and then inflate the threat. The threat is big enough without us having to exaggerate it."

By speaking of Saddam Hussein, the Sunni insurgency in Iraq, the Taliban, the Iranian government, Hezbollah, and Al Qaeda in terms of one big war, Administration officials and ideologues have made Osama bin Laden's job much easier. "You don't play to the enemy's global information strategy of making it all one fight," Kilcullen said. He pointedly avoided describing this as the Administration's approach. "You say, 'Actually, there are sixty different groups in sixty different countries who all have different objectives. Let's not talk about bin Laden's objectives—let's talk about *your* objectives. How do we solve that problem?'" In other words, the global ambitions of the enemy don't automatically demand a monolithic response.

The more Kilcullen travels to the various theatres of war, the less he thinks that the lessons of Malaya and Vietnam are useful guides in the current conflict. "Classical counterinsurgency is designed to defeat insurgency in one country," he writes in his *Strategic Studies* article. "We need a new paradigm, capable of addressing globalised insurgency." After a recent trip to Afghanistan, where Taliban forces have begun to mount large operations in the Pashto-speaking south of the country, he told me, "This ain't your granddaddy's counterinsurgency." Many American units there, he said, are executing the new field manual's tactics brilliantly. For example, before conducting operations in a given area, soldiers sit down over bread and tea with tribal leaders and find out what they need—Korans, cold-weather gear, a hydroelectric dynamo. In exchange for promises of local support, the Americans gather the supplies and then, within hours of the end of fighting, produce them, to show what can be gained from cooperating.

But the Taliban seem to be waging a different war, driven entirely by information operations. "They're essentially armed propaganda organizations," Kilcullen said. "They switch between guerrilla activity and terrorist activity as they need to, in order to maintain the political momentum, and it's all about an information operation that generates the perception of an unstoppable, growing insurgency." After travelling through southern Afghanistan, Kilcullen e-mailed me:

One good example of Taliban information strategy is their use of "night letters." They have been pushing local farmers in several provinces (Helmand, Uruzgan, Kandahar) to grow poppy instead of regular crops, and using night-time threats and intimidation to punish those who don't and convince others to convert to poppy. This is not because they need more opium—God knows they already have enough—but because they're trying to detach the local people from the legal economy and the legally approved governance system of the provinces and districts, to weaken the hold of central and provincial government. Get the people doing something illegal, and they're less likely to feel able to support the government, and more willing to do other illegal things (e.g. join the insurgency)—this is a classic old Bolshevik tactic from the early cold war, by the way. They are specifically trying to send the message: "The government can neither help you nor hurt us. We can hurt you, or protect you—the choice is yours." They also use object lessons, making an example of people who don't cooperate—for example, dozens of provincial-level officials have been assassinated this year, again as an "armed propaganda" tool—not because they want one official less but because they want to send the message "We can reach out and touch you if you cross us." Classic armed information operation.

Kilcullen doesn't believe that an entirely "soft" counterinsurgency approach can work against such tactics. In his view, winning hearts and minds is not a matter of making local people *like* you—as some American initiates to counterinsurgency whom I met in Iraq seemed to believe—but of getting them to accept that supporting your side is in their interest, which requires an element of coercion. Kilcullen met

senior European officers with the NATO force in Afghanistan who seemed to be applying “a development model to counterinsurgency,” hoping that gratitude for good work would bring the Afghans over to their side. He told me, “In a counterinsurgency, the gratitude effect will last until the sun goes down and the insurgents show up and say, ‘You’re on our side, aren’t you? Otherwise, we’re going to kill you.’ If one side is willing to apply lethal force to bring the population to its side and the other side isn’t, ultimately you’re going to find yourself losing.” Kilcullen was describing a willingness to show local people that supporting the enemy risks harm and hardship, not a campaign like the Phoenix program in Vietnam, in which noncombatants were assassinated; besides being unethical, such a tactic would inevitably backfire in the age of globalized information. Nevertheless, because he talks about war with an analyst’s rationalism and a practitioner’s matter-of-factness, Kilcullen can appear deceptively detached from its consequences.

An information strategy seems to be driving the agenda of every radical Islamist movement. Kilcullen noted that when insurgents ambush an American convoy in Iraq, “they’re not doing that because they want to reduce the number of Humvees we have in Iraq by one. They’re doing it because they want spectacular media footage of a burning Humvee.” Last year, a letter surfaced that is believed to have been sent from Ayman al-Zawahiri, bin Laden’s deputy, to the leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, nine months before Zarqawi’s death; the letter urged Zarqawi to make his videotaped beheadings and mass slaughter of Shiite civilians less gruesome. Kilcullen interpreted the letter as “basically saying to Zarqawi, ‘Justify your attacks on the basis of how they support our information strategy.’” As soon as the recent fighting in Lebanon between Hezbollah and Israeli troops ended, Hezbollah marked, with its party flags, houses that had been damaged. Kilcullen said, “That’s not a reconstruction operation—it’s an information operation. It’s influence. They’re going out there to send a couple of messages. To the Lebanese people they’re saying, ‘We’re going to take care of you.’ To all the aid agencies it’s like a dog pissing on trees: they’re saying, ‘We own this house—don’t you touch it.’” He went on, “When the aid agencies arrive a few days later, they have to negotiate with Hezbollah because there’s a Hezbollah flag on the house. Hezbollah says, ‘Yeah, you can sell a contract to us to fix up that house.’ It’s an information operation. They’re trying to generate *influence*.”

The result is an intimidated or motivated population, and a spike in fund-raising and recruiting. “When you go on YouTube and look at one of these attacks in Iraq, all you see is the video,” Kilcullen said. “If you go to some jihadist Web sites, you see the same video and then a button next to it that says, ‘Click here and donate.’” The Afghan or Iraqi or Lebanese insurgent, unlike his Vietnamese or Salvadoran predecessor, can plug into a global media network that will instantly amplify his message. After Kilcullen returned from Afghanistan last month, he stayed up late one Saturday night (“because I have no social life”) and calculated how many sources of information existed for a Vietnamese villager in 1966 and for an Afghan villager in 2006. He concluded that the former had ten, almost half under government control, such as Saigon radio and local officials; the latter has twenty-five (counting the Internet as only one), of which just five are controlled by the government. Most of the rest—including e-mail, satellite phone, and text messaging—are independent but more easily exploited by insurgents than by the Afghan government. And it is on the level of influencing perceptions that these wars will be won or lost. “The international information environment is critical to the success of America’s mission,” Kilcullen said.

In the information war, America and its allies are barely competing. America’s information operations, far from being the primary strategy, simply support military actions, and often badly: a Pentagon spokesman announces a battle victory, but no one in the area of the battlefield hears him (or would believe him anyway). Just as the Indonesians failed in East Timor, in spite of using locally successful tactics, Kilcullen said, “We’ve done a similar thing in Iraq—we’ve arguably done O.K. on the ground in some places, but we’re totally losing the domestic information battle. In Afghanistan, it still could go either way.”

However careful Kilcullen is not to criticize Administration policy, his argument amounts to a thoroughgoing critique. As a foreigner who is not a career official in the U.S. government, he has more distance and freedom to discuss the war on jihadism frankly, and in ways that his American counterparts rarely can. “It’s now fundamentally an information fight,” he said. “The enemy gets that, and we don’t yet get that, and I think that’s why we’re losing.”

In late September, Kilcullen was one of the featured speakers at a conference in Washington, organized by the State and Defense Departments, on bringing the civilian branches of the government into the global counterinsurgency effort. In the hallway outside the meeting room, he made a point of introducing me to another speaker, an anthropologist and Pentagon consultant named Montgomery McFate. For five years, McFate later told me, she has been making it her “evangelical mission” to get the Department of Defense to understand the importance of “cultural knowledge.” McFate is forty years old, with hair cut stylishly short and an air of humorous cool. When I asked why a social scientist would want to help the war effort, she replied, only half joking, “Because I’m engaged in a massive act of rebellion against my hippie parents.”

McFate grew up in the sixties on a communal houseboat in Marin County, California. Her parents were friends with Jack Kerouac and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and one of her schoolmates was the daughter of Jefferson Airplane’s Grace Slick and Paul Kantner. Like Kilcullen, she was drawn to the study of human conflict and also its reality: at Yale, where she received a doctorate, her dissertation was based on several years she spent living among supporters of the Irish Republican Army and then among British counterinsurgents. In Northern Ireland, McFate discovered something very like what Kilcullen found in West Java: insurgency runs in families and social networks, held together by persistent cultural narratives—in this case, the eight-hundred-year-old saga of “perfidious Albion.” She went on to marry a U.S. Army officer. “When I was little in California, we never believed there was such a thing as the Cold War,” McFate said. “That was a bunch of lies that the government fed us to keep us paranoid. Of course, there was a thing called the Cold War, and we nearly lost. And there was no guarantee that we were going to win. And this thing that’s happening now is, without taking that too far, similar.” After September 11th, McFate said, she became “passionate about one issue: the government’s need to actually understand its adversaries,” in the same way that the United States came to understand—and thereby undermine—the Soviet Union. If, as Kilcullen and Crumpton maintain, the battlefield in the global counterinsurgency is intimately local, then the American government needs what McFate calls a “granular” knowledge of the social terrains on which it is competing.

In 2004, when McFate had a fellowship at the Office of Naval Research, she got a call from a science adviser to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He had been contacted by battalion commanders with the 4th Infantry Division in a violent sector of the Sunni Triangle, in Iraq. “We’re having a really hard time out here—we have no idea how this society works,” the commanders said. “Could you help us?” The science adviser replied that he was a mathematical physicist, and turned for help to one of the few anthropologists he could find in the Defense Department.

For decades, the Pentagon and the humanistic social sciences have had little to do with each other. In 1964, the Pentagon set up a program called, with the self-conscious idealism of the period, Project Camelot. Anthropologists were hired and sent abroad to conduct a multiyear study of the factors that promote stability or war in certain societies, beginning with Chile. When news of the program leaked, the uproar in Chile and America forced Defense Secretary Robert McNamara to cancel it. “The Department of Defense has invested hardly any money in conducting ethnographic research in areas where conflict was occurring since 1965,” McFate told me. After Project Camelot and Vietnam, where social scientists often did contract work for the U.S. military, professional associations discouraged such involvement. (“Academic anthropologists hate me for working with D.O.D.,” McFate said.) Kilcullen, who calls counterinsurgency “armed social science,” told me, “This is fundamentally about the broken

relationship between the government and the discipline of anthropology. What broke that relationship is Vietnam. And people still haven't recovered from that." As a result, a complex human understanding of societies at war has been lost. "But it didn't have to be lost," McFate said. During the Second World War, anthropologists such as Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson, Geoffrey Gorer, and Ruth Benedict provided the Allied war effort with essential insights into Asian societies. Gorer and Benedict suggested, for example, that the terms of Japan's surrender be separated from the question of the emperor's abdication, because the emperor was thought to embody the country's soul; doing so allowed the Japanese to accept unconditional surrender. McFate sees herself as reaching back to this tradition of military-academic cooperation.

By 2004, the military desperately needed cooperation. McFate saw Americans in Iraq make one strategic mistake after another because they didn't understand the nature of Iraqi society. In an article in *Joint Force Quarterly*, she wrote, "Once the Sunni Ba'athists lost their prestigious jobs, were humiliated in the conflict, and got frozen out through de-Ba'athification, the tribal network became the backbone of the insurgency. The tribal insurgency is a direct result of our misunderstanding the Iraqi culture." In the course of eighteen months of interviews with returning soldiers, she was told by one Marine Corps officer, "My marines were almost wholly uninterested in interacting with the local population. Our primary mission was the security of Camp Falluja. We relieved soldiers from the 82nd Airborne Division, and their assessment was that every local was participating or complicit with the enemy. This view was quickly adopted by my unit and framed all of our actions (and reactions)." Another marine told McFate that his unit had lost the battle to influence public opinion because it used the wrong approach to communication: "We were focussed on broadcast media and metrics. But this had no impact because Iraqis spread information through rumor. We should have been visiting their coffee shops."

The result of efforts like McFate's is a new project with the quintessential Pentagon name Cultural Operations Research Human Terrain. It began in the form of a "ruggedized" laptop computer, loaded with data from social-science research conducted in Iraq—such as, McFate said, "an analysis of the eighty-eight tribes and subtribes in a particular province." Now the project is recruiting social scientists around the country to join five-person "human terrain" teams that would go to Iraq and Afghanistan with combat brigades and serve as cultural advisers on six-to-nine-month tours. Pilot teams are planning to leave next spring.

Steve Fondacaro, a retired Army colonel who for a year commanded the Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Task Force in Iraq, is in charge of the Human Terrain project. Fondacaro sees the war in the same terms as Kilcullen. "The new element of power that has emerged in the last thirty to forty years and has subsumed the rest is information," he said. "A revolution happened without us knowing or paying attention. Perception truly now is reality, and our enemies know it. We have to fight on the information battlefield." I asked him what the government should have done, say, in the case of revelations of abuse at the Abu Ghraib prison. "You're talking to a radical here," Fondacaro said. "Immediately be the first one to tell the story. Don't let anyone else do it. That carries so much strategic weight." He added, "Iraqis are not shocked by torture. It would have impressed them if we had exposed it, punished it, rectified it." But senior military leadership, he said, remains closed to this kind of thinking. He is turning for help to academics—to "social scientists who want to educate me," he said. So far, though, Fondacaro has hired just one anthropologist. When I spoke to her by telephone, she admitted that the assignment comes with huge ethical risks. "I do not want to get anybody killed," she said. Some of her colleagues are curious, she said; others are critical. "I end up getting shunned at cocktail parties," she said. "I see there could be misuse. But I just can't stand to sit back and watch these mistakes happen over and over as people get killed, and do nothing."

At the counterinsurgency conference in Washington, the tone among the uniformed officers, civilian officials, and various experts was urgent, almost desperate. James Kunder, a former marine and the

acting deputy of the U.S. Agency for International Development, pointed out that in Iraq and Afghanistan “the civilian agencies have received 1.4 per cent of the total money,” whereas classical counterinsurgency doctrine says that eighty per cent of the effort should be nonmilitary. During Vietnam, his agency had fifteen thousand employees; it now has two thousand. After the end of the Cold War, foreign-service and aid budgets were sharply cut. “Size matters,” Kunder said, noting that throughout the civilian agencies there are shortages of money and personnel. To staff the embassy in Baghdad, the State Department has had to steal officers from other embassies, and the government can’t even fill the provincial reconstruction teams it has tried to set up in Iraq and Afghanistan. While correcting these shortages could not have prevented the deepening disaster in Iraq, they betray the government’s priorities.

In early 2004, as Iraq was beginning to unravel, Senator Richard Lugar, the Indiana Republican who chairs the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Senator Joseph Biden, the Delaware Democrat, introduced legislation for a nation-building office, under the aegis of the State Department. The office would be able to tap into contingency funds and would allow cabinet-department officials, along with congressional staff people and civilian experts, to carry out overseas operations to help stabilize and rebuild failed states and societies shattered by war—to do it deliberately and well rather than in the ad-hoc fashion that has characterized interventions from Somalia and Kosovo to Iraq. Lugar envisioned both an active-duty contingent and a reserve corps.

The bill’s biggest supporter was the military, which frequently finds itself forced to do tasks overseas for which civilians are better prepared, such as training police or rebuilding sewers. But Colin Powell, then the Secretary of State, and other Administration officials refused to give it strong backing. Then, in the summer of 2004, the Administration reversed course by announcing the creation, in the State Department, of the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization; the office was given the imprimatur of National Security Presidential Directive 44. At the September conference in Washington, Kilcullen held up the office as a model for how to bring civilians into counterinsurgency: “True enough, the words ‘insurgency,’ ‘insurgent,’ and ‘counterinsurgency’ do not appear in N.S.P.D. 44, but it clearly envisages the need to deploy integrated whole-of-government capabilities in hostile environments.”

But the new office was virtually orphaned at birth. Congress provided only seven million of the hundred million dollars requested by the Administration, which never made the office a top Presidential priority. The State Department has contributed fifteen officials who can manage overseas operations, but other agencies have offered nothing. The office thus has no ability to coordinate operations, such as mobilizing police trainers, even as Iraq and Afghanistan deteriorate and new emergencies loom in places like Darfur and Pakistan. It has become insiders’ favorite example of bureaucratic inertia in the face of glaring need.

Frederick Barton, an expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think tank, considers failures like these to be a prime cause of American setbacks in fighting global jihadism. “Hard power is not the way we’re going to make an impression,” he told me, and he cited Pakistan, where a huge population, rising militancy, nuclear weapons, and the remnants of Al Qaeda’s leadership create a combustible mix. According to Barton’s figures, since 2002 America has spent more than six billion dollars on buttressing the Pakistani military, and probably a similar amount on intelligence (the number is kept secret). Yet it has spent less than a billion dollars on aid for education and economic development, in a country where Islamist madrassas and joblessness contribute to the radicalization of young people. On a recent visit to Nigeria, Barton heard that American propaganda efforts are being outclassed by those of the Iranians and the Saudis. “What would Pepsi-Cola or Disney do?” he asked. “We’re not thinking creatively, expansively. We are sclerotic, bureaucratic, lumbering—you can see the U.S. coming from miles away.”

If, as Kilcullen says, the global counterinsurgency is primarily an information war, one place where American strategy should be executed is the State Department office of Karen Hughes, the

Under-Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. Hughes is a longtime Bush adviser from Texas. One of her first missions, in September, 2005, took her to the Middle East, where her efforts to speak with Muslim women as fellow-“moms” and religious believers received poor reviews. Last year, she sent out a memo to American embassies urging diplomats to make themselves widely available to the local press, but she also warned them against saying anything that might seem to deviate from Administration policy. The choice of a high-level political operative to run the government’s global-outreach effort suggests that the Bush Administration sees public diplomacy the way it sees campaigning, with the same emphasis on top-down message discipline. “It has this fixation with strategic communications—whatever that is,” an expert in public diplomacy with close ties to the State Department told me. “It’s just hokum. When you do strategic communications, it fails, because nothing gets out.” She cited a news report that the Voice of America wanted to produce on American-funded AIDS programs in Africa. The V.O.A. was told by a government official that the Office of the U.S. Global AIDS Coördinator would have to give its approval before anything could be broadcast. (The decision was later overruled.) “We’re spending billions of dollars on AIDS,” the expert said—an effort that could generate considerable gratitude in African countries with substantial Muslim populations, such as Somalia and Nigeria. “But no one in Africa has a clue.”

After the Cold War, the government closed down the United States Information Service and, with it, a number of libraries and cultural centers around the world. Since September 11th, there has been an attempt to revive such public diplomacy, but, with American embassies now barricaded or built far from city centers, only the most dedicated local people will use their resources. To circumvent this problem, the State Department has established what it calls American Corners—rooms or shelves in foreign libraries dedicated to American books and culture. “It’s a good idea, but they’re small and marginal,” the expert said. She recently visited the American Corner in the main library in Kano, Nigeria, a center of Islamic learning. “I had to laugh,” she said. “A few Africans asleep at the switch, a couple of computers that weren’t working, a video series on George Washington that no one was using.” She mentioned one encouraging new example of public diplomacy, funded partly by Henry Crumpton’s office: Voice of America news broadcasts will begin airing next February in the language of Somalia, a country of increasing worry to counterterrorism officials. In general, though, there is little organized American effort to rebut the jihadist conspiracy theories that circulate daily among the Muslims living in populous countries such as Indonesia, Pakistan, and Nigeria.

According to the expert, an American diplomat with years of experience identified another obstacle to American outreach. “Let’s face it,” he told her. “All public diplomacy is on hold till George Bush is out of office.”

I once asked David Kilcullen if he thought that America was fundamentally able to deal with the global jihad. Is a society in which few people spend much time overseas or learn a second language, which is impatient with chronic problems, whose vision of war is of huge air and armor battles ended by the signing of articles of surrender, and which tends to assume that everyone is basically alike cut out for this new “long war”?

Kilcullen reminded me that there was a precedent for American success in a sustained struggle with a formidable enemy. “If this is the Cold War—if that analogy holds—then right now we’re in, like, 1953. This is a long way to go here. It didn’t all happen overnight—but it happened.” The Cold War, he emphasized, was many wars, constructed in many different models, fought in many different ways: a nuclear standoff between the superpowers, insurgencies in developing countries, a struggle of ideas in Europe. “Our current battle is a new Cold War,” Kilcullen said, “but it’s not monolithic. You’ve got to define the enemy as narrowly as you can get away with.”

President Bush has used the Cold War as an inspirational analogy almost from the beginning of the war

on terror. Last month, in Riga, Latvia, he reminded an audience of the early years of the Cold War, “when freedom’s victory was not so obvious or assured.” Six decades later, he went on, “freedom in Europe has brought peace to Europe, and freedom has brought the power to bring peace to the broader Middle East.” Bush’s die-hard supporters compare him to Harry S. Truman, who was reviled in his last years in office but has been vindicated by history as a plainspoken visionary.

An Administration official pointed out that the President’s speeches on the war are like the last paragraph of every Churchill speech from the Second World War: a soaring peroration about freedom, civilization, and darkness. But in Churchill’s case, the official went on, nineteen pages of analysis, contextualization, and persuasion preceded that final paragraph. A Bush speech gives only the uplift—which suggests that there is no strategy beyond it. Bush’s notion of a titanic struggle between good and evil, between freedom and those who hate freedom, recalls the rigid anti-Communism of Whittaker Chambers, William F. Buckley, Jr., and Barry Goldwater. Montgomery McFate noted that the current avatars of right-wing Cold Warriors, the neoconservatives, have dismissed all Iraqi insurgents as “dead enders” and “bad people.” Terms like “totalitarianism” and “Islamofascism,” she said, which stir the American historical memory, mislead policymakers into greatly increasing the number of our enemies and coming up with wrongheaded strategies against them. “That’s not what the insurgents call themselves,” she said. “If you can’t call something by its name—if you can’t say, ‘This is what this phenomenon is, it has structure, meaning, agency’—how can you ever fight it?” In other words, even if we think that a jihadi in Yemen has ideas similar to those of an Islamist in Java, we have to approach them in discrete ways, both to prevent them from becoming a unified movement and because their particular political yearnings are different.

Kilcullen is attempting to revive a strain of Cold War thought that saw the confrontation with Communism not primarily as a blunt military struggle but as a subtle propaganda war that required deep knowledge of diverse enemies and civilian populations. By this standard, America’s performance against radical Islamists thus far is dismal. Bruce Hoffman, of Georgetown University, a former RAND Corporation analyst who began to use the term “global counterinsurgency” around the same time as Kilcullen, pointed to two Cold War projects: RAND’s study of the motivation and morale of the Vietcong in the mid-sixties, based on extensive interviews with prisoners and former insurgents, which led some analysts to conclude that the war was unwinnable; and a survey by Radio Free Europe of two hundred thousand émigrés from the East Bloc in the eighties, which used the findings to shape broadcasts. “We haven’t done anything like that in this struggle,” Hoffman said, and he cited the thousands of detainees in Iraq. “Instead of turning the prisons into insurgent universities, you could have a systematic process that would be based on scientific surveys designed to elicit certain information on how people joined, who their leaders were, how leadership was exercised, how group cohesion was maintained.” In other words, America would get to know its enemy. Hoffman added, “Even though we say it’s going to be the long war, we still have this enormous sense of impatience. Are we committed to doing the fundamental spadework that’s necessary?”

Kilcullen’s thinking is informed by some of the key texts of Cold War social science, such as Eric Hoffer’s “The True Believer,” which analyzed the conversion of frustrated individuals into members of fanatical mass movements, and Philip Selznick’s “The Organizational Weapon: A Study of Bolshevik Strategy and Tactics,” which described how Communists subverted existing social groups and institutions like trade unions. To these older theoretical guides he adds two recent studies of radical Islam: “Globalized Islam,” by the French scholar Olivier Roy, and “Understanding Terror Networks,” by Marc Sageman, an American forensic psychiatrist and former covert operator with the mujahideen in Afghanistan. After September 11th, Sageman traced the paths of a hundred and seventy-two alienated young Muslims who joined the jihad, and found that the common ground lay not in personal pathology, poverty, or religious belief but in social bonds. Roy sees the rise of “neo-fundamentalism” among Western Muslims as a new identity movement shaped by its response to globalization. In the margin of a section of Roy’s book called “Is Jihad Closer to Marx Than to the Koran?” Kilcullen noted, “If Islamism

is the new leftism, then the strategies and techniques used to counter Marxist subversion during the Cold War may have direct or indirect relevance to combating Al Qaeda-sponsored subversion.”

Drawing on these studies, Kilcullen has plotted out a “ladder of extremism” that shows the progress of a jihadist. At the bottom is the vast population of mainstream Muslims, who are potential allies against radical Islamism as well as potential targets of subversion, and whose grievances can be addressed by political reform. The next tier up is a smaller number of “alienated Muslims,” who have given up on reform. Some of these join radical groups, like the young Muslims in North London who spend afternoons at the local community center watching jihadist videos. They require “ideological conversion”—that is, counter-subversion, which Kilcullen compares to helping young men leave gangs. (In a lecture that Kilcullen teaches on counterterrorism at Johns Hopkins, his students watch “Fight Club,” the 1999 satire about anti-capitalist terrorists, to see a radical ideology without an Islamic face.) A smaller number of these individuals, already steeped in the atmosphere of radical mosques and extremist discussions, end up joining local and regional insurgent cells, usually as the result of a “biographical trigger—they will lose a friend in Iraq, or see something that shocks them on television.” With these insurgents, the full range of counterinsurgency tools has to be used, including violence and persuasion. The very small number of fighters who are recruited to the top tier of Al Qaeda and its affiliated terrorist groups are beyond persuasion or conversion. “They’re so committed you’ve got to destroy them,” Kilcullen said. “But you’ve got to do it in such a way that you don’t create new terrorists.”

When I asked him to outline a counter-propaganda strategy, he described three basic methods. “We’ve got to create resistance to their message,” he said. “We’ve got to co-opt or assist people who have a counter-message. And we might need to consider creating or supporting the creation of rival organizations.” Bruce Hoffman told me that jihadists have posted five thousand Web sites that react quickly and imaginatively to events. In 2004, he said, a jihadist rap video called “Dirty Kuffar” became widely popular with young Muslims in Britain: “It’s like Ali G wearing a balaclava and having a pistol in one hand and a Koran in the other.” Hoffman believes that America must help foreign governments and civil-society groups flood the Internet with persuasively youthful Web sites presenting anti-jihadist messages—but not necessarily pro-American ones, and without leaving American fingerprints.

Kilcullen argues that Western governments should establish competing “trusted networks” in Muslim countries: friendly mosques, professional associations, and labor unions. (A favorite Kilcullen example from the Cold War is left-wing anti-Communist trade unions, which gave the working class in Western Europe an outlet for its grievances without driving it into the arms of the Soviet Union.) The U.S. should also support traditional authority figures—community leaders, father figures, moderate imams—in countries where the destabilizing transition to modernity has inspired Islamist violence. “You’ve got to be quiet about it,” he cautioned. “You don’t go in there like a missionary.” The key is providing a social context for individuals to choose ways other than jihad.

Kilcullen’s proposals will not be easy to implement at a moment when the government’s resources and attention are being severely drained by the chaos in Iraq. And, if some of his ideas seem sketchy, it’s because he and his colleagues have only just begun to think along these lines. The U.S. government, encumbered by habit and inertia, has not adapted as quickly to the changing terrain as the light-footed, mercurial jihadists. America’s many failures in the war on terror have led a number of thinkers to conclude that the problem is institutional. Thomas Barnett, a military analyst, proposes dividing the Department of Defense into two sections: one to fight big wars and one for insurgencies and nation-building. Lawrence Wilkerson, a retired Army colonel and Colin Powell’s former chief of staff, goes even further. He thinks that the entire national-security bureaucracy, which was essentially set in place at the start of the Cold War, is incapable of dealing with the new threats and should be overhauled, so that the government can work faster to prevent conflicts or to intervene early. “Especially in light of this Administration, but also other recent ones, do we really want to concentrate power so incredibly in the White House?” he asked. “And, if we do, why do we still have the departments, except as an

appendage of bureaucracy that becomes an impediment?” In Wilkerson’s vision, new legislation would create a “unified command,” with leadership drawn from across the civilian agencies, which “could supplant the existing bureaucracy.”

Since September 11th, the government’s traditional approach to national security has proved inadequate in one area after another. The intelligence agencies habitually rely on satellites and spies, when most of the information that matters now, as Kilcullen pointed out, is “open source”—available to anyone with an Internet connection. Traditional diplomacy, with its emphasis on treaties and geopolitical debates, is less relevant than the ability to understand and influence foreign populations—not in their councils of state but in their villages and slums. And future enemies are unlikely to confront the world’s overwhelming military power with conventional warfare; technology-assisted insurgency is proving far more effective. At the highest levels of Western governments, the failure of traditional approaches to counter the jihadist threat has had a paralyzing effect. “I sense we’ve lost the ability to think strategically,” Field Marshal Sir Peter Inge, the former chief of the British armed forces, has said of his government. He could have been describing the White House and the Pentagon.

Kilcullen’s strategic mind, by contrast, seems remarkably febrile. I could call him at the office or at home at any hour of the night and he’d be jotting down ideas in one of his little black notebooks, ready to think out loud. Kilcullen, Crumpton, and their colleagues are desperately trying to develop a lasting new strategy that, in Kilcullen’s words, would be neither Republican nor Democratic. Bruce Hoffman said, “We’re talking about a profound shift in mind-set and attitude”—not to mention a drastic change in budgetary and bureaucratic priorities. “And that may not be achievable until there’s a change in Administration.” Kilcullen is now in charge of writing a new counterinsurgency manual for the civilian government, and early this month he briefed Condoleezza Rice on his findings in Afghanistan. But his ideas have yet to penetrate the fortress that is the Bush White House. Hoffman said, “Isn’t it ironic that an Australian is spearheading this shift, together with a former covert operator? It shows that it’s almost too revolutionary for the places where it should be discussed—the Pentagon, the National Security Council.” At a moment when the Bush Administration has run out of ideas and lost control, it could turn away from its “war on terror” and follow a different path—one that is right under its nose. ♦