



The forgotten front: Patron-client relationships in counterinsurgency

by Walter C. Ladwig III, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017, 360 pp., £28.99 (PB), ISBN: 978-1-316-62180-6

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BOOK REVIEW

The forgotten front: Patron-client relationships in counterinsurgency, by Walter C. Ladwig III, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017, 360 pp., £28.99 (PB), ISBN: 978-1-316-62180-6

In this meticulously researched and well-written volume, Walter C. Ladwig III identifies a crucial oversight in the American approach to counter-insurgency (COIN) operations undertaken with partner governments: the bizarre assumption 'that the United States will share common goals and priorities with a local government it is assisting in COIN, which will make it relatively easy to convince that government to implement U.S. counterinsurgency prescriptions' (p. 1). American counter-insurgency doctrine (e.g. *Counterinsurgency Field Manual (FM 3-24)*) and the literature from which *FM 3-24* draws both presume a 'unity of interest between the United States and the state it is supporting' and understate the difficulties in persuading host governments to adopt Washington's prescribed courses of action (p. 290). Ladwig also identifies when the American efforts were not unified and the client was able to exploit different preferences of American agencies.

Curiously, these flawed premises perdure despite the voluminous body of evidence that attests to a different reality in which the United States, more often than not, has had difficulty in persuading the counter-insurgent government to abide by American counter-insurgency doctrine, which usually prescribes a variety of reforms to undermine insurgents while creating greater political stability. The reason for the counterinsurgent's reticence to take on these reforms, which may include *inter alia* cessation of patronage politics, economic reform, streamlining and professionalising military chain of command, is simple: these reforms threaten regime survival. Oddly, regimes seemingly are most recalcitrant when they are utterly dependent upon American aid likely because of the belief – fostered by American behaviour – that they are too important to fail. Thus, Ladwig observes that Washington often finds itself 'in the paradoxical situation of supporting weak allies in danger of internal collapse, who were highly dependent upon [this support] for their continued survival, yet over whom Washington had little control or influence' (p. 3). These problems with the patron-client relationship and their implication for COIN efforts is what Ladwig calls the 'forgotten front' of COIN campaigns. He avers that the forgotten front deserves as much attention as the military effort.

By dilating upon the U.S. patron-client relationship, Ladwig seeks to understand the conditions under which the United States, and presumably other liberal great powers, can structure assistance to elicit greater alignment of interests and concomitant actions. After finding other explanatory frameworks inadequate, he employs agency theory from which he identifies two influence strategies: inducement and conditionality. The former assumes that, when the patron unilaterally

provides aid and public overtures of support, the client will reciprocate by complying with the patron's expectations. The latter, in contrast, seeks to shape client behaviour by rendering assistance contingent upon the client's *prior* implementation of the patron's prescriptions.

To test the relative utility of these two strategies, Ladwig uses the comparative historical case study approach to evaluate three historical case studies which he believes are 'the most significant U.S. counterinsurgency support efforts of the Cold War' (p. 6): the Philippines (1946–54), Vietnam (1955–63), El Salvador (1979–91). Ladwig chose these cases because he sought to make a controlled comparison and, to this end, these cases share several important attributes. All three involved American support to an indigenous government. Washington viewed all three countries as strategically important. The governments in question were all highly dependent upon American support for survival yet resisted American policy prescriptions. They also occurred during the Cold War, which in some measure holds constant the geopolitical contexts in which these conflicts unfolded (p. 10).

By engaging in extensive and meticulous archival research, Ladwig identifies twenty-six discreet influence events when the host nation resisted American demands. In all three cases, the Americans viewed these policies as critical because 'the military, political, and economic shortcomings of the local government were key factors driving popular support for the insurgents while also alienating non-Communist elites' (p. 290). By carefully analysing these influence events, Ladwig observes that the patron cannot simply generate leverage by lavishing aid upon the client; rather leverage stems from rigorous conditionality. The lessons that Ladwig draws from these cases seem to have salience for contemporary American alliances challenges in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan where Washington has not employed conditionality and where the client has either marginally complied if not outright undermined U.S. interests.

Ladwig makes the important observation that Washington has generally (at least in the beginning years of a COIN campaign) assumed that the host government is legitimate. By increasing the state's ability to administer ostensibly 'public goods' to more peripheral parts of the country, insurgents will have less space to operate. However, in many cases, the client is actually delivering 'public bads'. David Kilcullen, writing of this phenomenon in Afghanistan under President Karzai's government in Afghanistan, wryly opined that if the American strategy 'is to extend the reach of a government that is corrupt, is oppressing its people and failing them, then the better we do at that strategy, the worse things are going to get' (cited on p. 291).

Ladwig concludes by offering five straightforward policy recommendations. Namely, Washington should: anticipate tense relations with the client; not fear using coercion in crises; exposit clear, measurable and realistic conditions; prepare for internal opposition; and cultivate ties with local reformers (pp. 307–312). With any study of this nature, one can quibble with choices made. While Ladwig is clear about why he chose these cases, he never identifies a potential universe of cases. Did he consider other cases? The three insurgencies he analysed were grievance-based, presumably by design. Are his prescriptions salient for other kinds of

insurgencies? The work also seems to assume that the American preferred courses of action would have been successful if only the obdurate client had acquiesced. The author never considers in detail what would have happened had the client acquiesced. Is it possible that the client was correct: that their regime would collapse? What impacts would such eventualities have for U.S. interests? Additionally, many decades have passed since the Cold War ended. Ladwig does not really consider if the intervening decades have precipitated new conditions that limit or otherwise caveat the applicability of his findings.

Notwithstanding these concerns, Ladwig has done yeoman's work with this volume. Not only does he contribute to the scholarly literature on counterinsurgency, in many cases he also contributes to the empirical understanding of the historical cases themselves. Ladwig's wry sense of humour, as reflected in his often-piquant quotes from his archival materials, is also to be commended. In short, this superb volume will be of interest to academics and, with any luck, practitioners.

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