

# 1 A “HAPPY COMBINATION OF CLEMENCY WITH FIRMNESS”: THE SMALL WARS PROLOGUE

Western powers have been engaged in counterinsurgency operations at least since the *Reconquista* of the Iberian Peninsula. The requirement to occupy the Western Hemisphere from 1492 – and later the Indian subcontinent, East Asia, and Africa – involved Western powers in armed conflict with local populations, much of it irregular warfare. Contemporary US COIN doctrine in its twenty-first-century form is an outgrowth of the belief, common in nineteenth-century France and Britain, that military action provided the mechanism for the dissemination of modern, Western values and attitudes as a foundation for indigenous governance and social, political, and economic transformation of pivotal regions.

The nineteenth century witnessed the establishment of small wars as a discrete category of warfare in France and Britain, one that required a special doctrine, an uncommon type of officer with a mindset and outlook distinct from those who prepared for and fought continental conflicts. Not only must colonial warriors prove to be excellent tacticians, but also they must prepare to engage non-Western populations on a political and cultural level. Because irregular or “small wars” were associated with imperial expansion, colonial soldiers had also to assemble a cast of influential supporters among journalists, geographic societies, army and navy leagues, and politicians to sell what was in effect a political project. The bid for the recognition of small wars as a separate category of service came about for several reasons, the increasing professionalization and industrialization of continental warfare most

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prominent among them.<sup>1</sup> Intensifying democratization of the political systems in these countries in an era of mass politics before 1914 also stimulated advocates of strategic superiority via small wars to fashion their own professional and doctrinal universe. In both Britain and France, demands for increased civilian control of the military that grew with the approach of the Great War joined with concerns about the barbarity of small war tactics and operations and questions about the risks and utility of imperial expansion. Especially from the turn of the twentieth century, sharpened tensions in the international system in the final phases of imperial expansion, caused in part by heated competition for diminishing swaths of unclaimed terrain, intensified diplomatic resistance to and journalistic scrutiny of small wars. Increasingly, stealth encroachments and territorial *faits accomplis* – standards in the small war repertoire – threatened to unsettle the international order. Their inherent brutality became a public relations liability for Western imperial powers that nonetheless were functioning democracies.

In this environment, small wars proponents had to rebrand rough methods of conquest and exploitative governance as an extension of “soft power” that benefited the governed (and flattered the West’s sense of cultural hubris). Indigenous resisters to these civilizing ministrations were delegitimized as thugs, bandits, criminal tribes, bitter-enders, or fanatics. In this way, COIN promises to operationalize humanitarianism. Indeed, *FM 3–24: Counterinsurgency* of 2006 replicates the righteousness of nineteenth-century imperialists when it brands the enemies of coalition occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan as “elusive, unethical and indiscriminate foes” organized in an insurgency “characterized by violence, immorality, distrust and deceit.”<sup>2</sup> This may indeed provide an accurate description of enemies of coalition occupations. On the other hand, populations of those countries who not for the first time have endured invasions and occupations by outsiders who employ indiscriminate violence, justified by trumped up security threats, and followed by occupations based on governance pacts with opportunists or sectarian and political rivals may perhaps be forgiven for failing to draw the stark moral distinctions that appear so obvious to the authors of *FM 3–24*.

Meanwhile, back at the staff colleges, continental warfare increasingly focused on the management and maneuver of technologically complex armies of millions to fight cataclysmic battles that decided the fate of nations. In this context, small warriors regressed in the eyes of their conventional colleagues into semi-warriors, quasi-professionals

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who misrepresented their skirmishes followed by forays into municipal governance as a skill comparable to big war management. Some conventional soldiers began to develop a distaste for those who went native in the worst sense, by adopting savage, degrading, primitive styles of warfare. Nowhere was this aversion more pronounced than in the United States, where at the US Military Academy at West Point, and in the wake of the Mexican (1846–1848) and Civil Wars (1861–1865), a category of military man who desired to reorganize the American army along European lines decried the total war savagery inflicted by “citizen soldiers” upon Native Americans as incompatible with American values.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Hoche, Suchet, and Bugeaud: the French antecedents of counterinsurgency**

Popular insurrection against authority and occupation is an age-old phenomenon. As American strategist and historian Edward Luttwak has noted, Romans, Ottomans, Russians, and World War II Germans controlled vast empires without resorting to a specialized category of soldier possessed of asymmetrical savvy. Counter terror, rather than counterinsurgency, was their preferred deterrent – “A massacre once in a while remained an effective warning for decades,” concludes Luttwak.<sup>4</sup> The idea of counterinsurgency is linked to democracy, and the notion that a government’s legitimacy is anchored in the consent of the governed. Therefore, when the French Revolution’s evangelization of modern, democratic ideas through the empowerment of a centralized state and later empire in turn provoked popular resistance in some quarters, the occasional massacre no longer seemed compatible with democratic humanism. Therefore, a package of tactics that allied force with persuasion and clemency had to be devised. The Battle of Algiers, Mai Lai, Abu Ghraib, Haditha, or killing rampages by a soldier in Afghanistan’s Panjwayi district,<sup>5</sup> could henceforth be explained as anomalies inflicted by stressed-out conscripts, by conventional soldiers untutored in the hearts and minds fundamentals of war among the people, or a regrettable collateral byproduct of necessary night raids or drone attacks rather than as patterns of racialized violence endemic to small wars. This was an evolutionary process in part because counter terror remained an effective tactic against groups whose culture, customs, religion, or previous encounters with occupation made them resistant to Westernized concepts of modernization. In Africa and parts

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of the Americas, the notion persisted into the twentieth century that lands had first to be emptied of their indigenous inhabitants to be made productive. But the increasing ambivalence of Western populations to the moral hazards and expense of empire required the codification of prescriptions that made conquest appear efficient, humane, and altruistic, as well as an act of economic and political self-interest for the ruling nations.

That the French were modern counterinsurgency pioneers whose practitioners continued to refine and guide the evolution of techniques and doctrine is well established in the community of counterinsurgency scholars. This is hardly surprising as French soldiers were the first to confront and work out techniques to master contemporary rebellions against their authority, both in France and in the Iberian birthplace of guerrilla warfare. British Major General Sir Charles Callwell is generally credited with first delineating in 1896 the prescriptions that established small wars as a distinct category of warfare with a glorious lineage and a professional codex equal to that of conventional war as celebrated in the proliferating general staff and war academies of the era. Callwell defined small wars at its most basic as “operations of regular armies against irregular, or comparatively speaking irregular forces.”

*Whenever a regular army finds itself engaged upon hostilities against irregular forces, or forces which in their armament, their organization, and their discipline are palpably inferior to it, the conditions of the campaign become distinct from the conditions of modern regular warfare.<sup>6</sup>*

Guerrilla warfare was of course a translation of small war, a much older tactic by which relatively diminutive groups of fighters utilized surprise as a force multiplier to carry out ambushes, sabotage, and raids to harass and forage on the margins of large clashes of armies.

Callwell credited Lazare Hoche with laying down tactical principles later followed by successors during his 1794 campaign against royalists in western France in rebellion against the French Revolution. Callwell’s acknowledgment of the French provenance of counterinsurgency is shared by John Arquilla, a special operations specialist at the Naval Postgraduate School, who believes that the three central counterinsurgency concepts – information operations, the role of swarm tactics in battle, and the need to understand how networks fight – can be

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discovered in the histories of the campaigns of Louis-Gabriel Suchet in Spain from 1808–1812, those of Thomas-Robert Bugeaud in Algeria in the 1840s, and Joseph Gallieni in Tonkin in the 1890s.<sup>7</sup>

As a founder of the small wars school, Callwell was eager to detect an ancestry, identify techniques that distinguished small from big war, and create a compendium of best practices as befitted a professional military institution. Callwell designated General Lazare Hoche, “whose conduct of the campaign against the *Chouans* and insurgents from La Vendée will ever remain a model of operations of this kind,” as, if not the Messiah of counterinsurgency, at least its John the Baptist who pioneered the light touch technique in small wars. Hoche, Callwell asserted, “achieved success as much by his happy combination of clemency with firmness, as by his masterly dispositions in the theater of war . . . It was a case of civil war, and the brilliant French soldier-administrator substituted this system for the devastation which had been tried by his predecessors.”<sup>8</sup> In truth, Hoche’s record belies this fiction of the light touch. Indeed, Hoche’s clemency succeeded precisely *because of*, not in contrast to, the “devastation . . . tried by his predecessors.”

A corporal in the Gardes Françaises when the Revolution erupted in 1789, Hoche was catapulted in four short years to the rank of major general in the Army of the Rhine by demonstrating his skills and courage in set-piece battles against Coalition forces on France’s northern and eastern frontiers. With this experience, in August 1794 he headed west as commander-in-chief of the armies of Brittany where he was to marshal his big war skills to tame a two-year-old royalist insurrection that the scorched-earth tactics of his predecessors had diminished but not completely extinguished. A change of approach was in order, and was made possible largely because the previous counter-terror campaign had reduced the popular revolt to a handful of holdouts. Hoche divided the theater into sections, each with its network of posts linked by mobile patrols, informed by an active intelligence service. The fittest soldiers were organized into fast-moving mobile columns that hunted down and surprised hardcore bands of insurgents. Adolphe Thiers, a self-styled military expert and convinced Orleanist with shallow sympathies for ostensibly pro-Bourbon revolts, praised Hoche’s use of “entrenched camps” from which he progressively enveloped

*the whole country . . . so as to leave no free space by which an enemy who was at all numerous could pass. These posts were*

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*directed to occupy every hamlet and village and disarm them. To accomplish this they were to seize the cattle which usually grazed together and the corn stowed away in the barns; they were also to secure the principal inhabitants; they were not to restore the cattle and corn, nor to release the persons taken as hostages, till the peasants should have voluntarily delivered up their arms.<sup>9</sup>*

Depriving peasants of their food and livelihoods while seizing hostages would seem to situate Hoche (and Thiers) more in the “firmness” than the “clemency” school of counterinsurgency that would have been familiar to any Roman governor or Persian satrap. But his “population-centric” tactics proved temporarily effective because of the nature of the insurgency, because of lucky timing, and because of the context in which they were applied.

More importantly, Hoche’s measures were linked to a political strategy. The wave of peasant insurrection that surged through western France in the spring of 1793 had been triggered by the Convention’s February 24 conscription decree, made necessary because the supply of patriotic volunteers who initially flocked to defend the Revolution was no longer sufficient to fill the ranks of French armies expanded to cope with the European coalition that that very revolution had called into being. French historian of the counter-revolution Jacques Godechot argues that the pro-Bourbon Breton Association, which had been organized by the local nobility and stockpiling muskets and gunpowder and organizing counter-revolutionary committees in the smaller towns since 1791, transformed these anti-conscription protests into a pro-royalist and pro-clerical insurrection. Together with peasants, the leaders of these groupings, eventually called the *Chouans*,<sup>10</sup> were able to mobilize those – and there were many – harmed by the changes brought by the Revolution which had confiscated Church lands, abolished the hated salt tax, which put both tax collectors and smugglers out of work, forced many nobles to emigrate leaving their households, estate workers, agents, managers, and solicitors without employment, and issued a worthless paper currency that had sent prices through the roof, which accentuated the hard times caused by poor harvests. One republican official categorized the *Chouans* as an “army composed of refractory priests, ex-salt-tax-collectors, bankrupts, excise men, solicitors’ clerks, valets of *émigrés*, monks and nuns, marquises, countesses and former

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nobles.”<sup>11</sup> With British encouragement, these losers of the French Revolution organized into military formations that soon numbered around 40,000 men, whom they christened the Catholic and Royal Army.

The rebels met early success in what was deemed the War of the Vendée, capturing some of the smaller towns and routing a diminutive republican force sent to defeat them. However, in late May 1793, just as the Republic appeared to have captured the initiative in the west and was poised to crush the rebellion, the Committee of Public Safety under Maximilian Robespierre in Paris was distracted by similar “federalist” rebellions from Bordeaux to Normandy, as well as in Toulouse, Marseilles, and Lyons, sparked by the arrest of the Girondin leaders in the Paris Convention. The six weeks required to quell the federalists handed the *Chouans* a new lease on life. But poor organization and discipline, a lack of weapons, London’s inability to sustain support for the rebels (largely because the latter failed to capture the port cities of Nantes or Grandville), and the absence of an offensive strategy opened the *Chouans* to a counterstroke. Three Republican armies composed largely of fanaticized Parisian and German volunteers spearheaded an offensive of such savagery that one French historian has labeled it a genocide.<sup>12</sup> The remnants of the Catholic and Royal Army were cornered and slaughtered at Savenay by Jean-Baptiste Kléber on December 23, 1793, after which he relapsed into conventional soldiering until he was assassinated in Cairo in 1800.

Repressions continued into 1794 as military commissions crisscrossed the region executing, often wholesale and in gruesome fashion, those suspected of aiding the rebellion, while “infernal columns” of soldiers laid waste to the countryside. *Chouan* leaders retaliated with attacks on those who had purchased confiscated Church and émigré noble properties, republican mayors, and priests who swore allegiance to the Republic. They also launched a profitable sideline in kidnapping and ransoming pro-Republican citizens. But such harassment constituted a feeble response to the Republican occupation.

Hoche’s (comparatively) more conciliatory strategy flowed from the toppling of Robespierre on 9 Thermidor, Year II (July 27, 1794), which effectively terminated the Revolution’s most radical phase, broke the stranglehold of the radical Parisian *sans culottes* on France’s political dynamic, and introduced a series of more moderate governments that sought to assuage public opinion rather than enflame it. In December, the

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Committee of Public Safety in Paris offered amnesty to all rebels who surrendered their muskets. Negotiations led to a ceasefire in January 1795, followed by local peace treaties; insurgents were indemnified for lost or damaged property and allowed to retain their weapons. Conscription, the original spark of discontent, was modified so that young men served in territorial militias rather than in Republican armies eligible for foreign deployment. The worthless paper currency issued by the Vendéen rebels was redeemed in Republican *assignats*, and the principal *Chouan* leaders received incentives of up to £200,000 to lay down their arms.

These peace treaties nearly came unstuck in the summer of 1795, when Hoche blocked British attempts to land émigré royalists on the coast of Brittany to link up with the vestiges of the Vendée revolt. Following another flare-up of *Chouannerie* in 1799, royalists abandoned popular insurrection in favor of plots to assassinate Napoleon.<sup>13</sup> Generous concessions and indemnities, the substitution of local militia service for national conscription, and Napoleon's 1801 *Concordat* with the Church took the wind out of the insurgents' sails. Afterward, eager to avoid another insurgency as he dealt with a multi-front European conflict, Napoleon exempted the Vendée completely from the empire's tax and conscription policies.<sup>14</sup>

So what are the relevant historical insights from Hoche's putative success? First, Hoche had no particular counterinsurgency experience when he arrived to clean up a rebellion already much diminished in the winter of 1793–1794 by brutal military means. He simply employed “petty war” tactics that any regular soldier of the period would have recognized and practiced. Second, the groundwork for war termination was laid by the scorched-earth campaign of Kléber and others, which smashed and demoralized the insurgent base. Third, the insurgents were severed from outside support because they failed to capture a port town through which London might have funneled arms and cash. Finally, while Callwell, like Thiers, emphasized the effectiveness of Hoche's counterinsurgent tactics, they neglect to mention that political concessions and a downward shift in the overall violence of the Revolution ended a conflict that, in effect, the insurgency won. The Convention, and subsequently Napoleon, had plenty of conscripts. So what was the point of forcing a French uniform on refractory Vendéen and Breton peasants who would quickly desert in any case? Paris simply did not want a Bourbon Restoration. The vast majority of the Vendée rebels cared little

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about who ruled in Paris. They simply did not want to be soldiers. Amnesty combined with indemnities, bribes, property restitution, the restoration of Church–State relations, and a softening, and subsequently suspension, of conscription appeased the rebels and split them from die-hard royalists and common criminals – mainly *ci-devant* nobles, former salt smugglers, and domestic servants put out of work by the Revolution and now severed from royalist and English backing.

So the Hoche story has far less relevance for the doctrine of counterinsurgency than Callwell or his followers in more recent times would like, particularly in their attempt to establish COIN’s legitimacy by tracing its lineage to Revolutionary France. Still, counterinsurgency aficionados, convinced that tactics, not strategy, hold the key to success in conflict, continue to ransack history to unearth primordial versions of key COIN concepts with which to decorate their doctrine’s pedigree. One such tactical archeologist of COIN’s past, John Arquilla, credits General Louis-Gabriel Suchet with formulating a successful information operations (IO) campaign to win over the populations of French-occupied Aragon and Catalonia in the Peninsular War (1808–1814). Arquilla makes two assertions in his effort to historicize IO. First, if the occupier is on message, the locals will buy into it, even if the occupation is inimical to their values and interests. And second, Suchet successfully suppressed the anti-French insurgency. Arquilla is wrong on both counts.

According to Arquilla, between 1808 and 1813 Suchet seduced the Aragonese and Catalans with a program that included the devolution of authority, infrastructure improvements, and the Napoleonic promise of modernization, administrative efficiency, and social progress.<sup>15</sup> The idea that good governance and material improvements in the standards of living win the hearts and minds of the target population is central to “information” or “psychological operations.”<sup>16</sup> Arquilla is correct to point out that Aragon did in fact briefly enjoy a reputation as the most pacified province in Spain in the early months of the French invasion. But this had nothing to do with the fact that occupied Spaniards bought into French IO, or that Suchet’s counterinsurgency tactics were effective. Suchet’s achievement was temporary, contingent, and a success only when contrasted with the ultimately catastrophic outcome of Napoleon’s Spanish project. Other than in Aragon and the sliver of bordering Catalonia over which Suchet had charge, the French totally lost the psychological warfare narrative in Spain. Napoleon’s deposition

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and imprisonment of the Bourbon Ferdinand VII – whom he replaced with his brother Joseph Bonaparte in 1808 – established a government regarded as illegitimate not only in Spain but in Europe and Latin America as well. Napoleon’s requirement that the Spaniards pay the costs of occupation translated into higher taxes and requisitions of Church lands. French liberation included a package of modern Revolutionary secularism that outraged conservative Spaniards already aghast that Napoleon had imprisoned two popes and annexed the Papal States to the Roman Republic. The fact that Napoleon was unable to vanquish Britain, combined with the presence of a significant and growing British Army on the Iberian Peninsula, kept hope of re-liberation alive.

How, allegedly, did Suchet manipulate IO to surmount these circumstances in Aragon? While a crust of Liberal opinion in Madrid anticipated the French ignition of a modernizing project, in Aragon and especially Catalonia, the Napoleonic invasion briefly revived medieval autonomist aspirations – at least until it became apparent that Napoleon planned to incorporate Catalonia, part of Aragon and Navarre into the French state (Catalonia became a French department in 1812). The fall of Zaragoza in February 1809, after a successful resistance the previous summer, followed by defeat of the main Spanish armies in the first half of 1809 stunned the population, removed immediate hope of liberation, and quieted the province. Suchet initially kept the Spanish administration in place because technically they still answered to the King of Spain, Joseph, not to the French. Meanwhile, nobles, the Church, and the administration in Aragon, concluding that France had won the war, collaborated with Suchet, not because French propaganda convinced them that they had been “liberated” by the occupiers, but to keep order and preserve their property and jobs.

It took two years for resistance to mobilize in Aragon and to acquire the arms and tactical skills necessary to battle the French. Wellington’s force remained small and active on the relatively distant Spanish–Portuguese frontier – that is, the other side of the country. Thus, Suchet could concentrate his entire 20,000-man corps on collecting resources and putting down opposition brutally, though not indiscriminately. In short, if Aragon and Catalonia initially remained quiet, it was despite “information operations,” not because of them.

Then things began to unravel. In February 1810 Napoleon decreed the Second Military Government. Henceforth, French commanders and