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Mark Moyar, *A Question of Command: Counterinsurgency from the Civil War to Iraq*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2009. Pp. xviii, 347. ISBN 978-0-300-15276-0.

Review by William J. Astore, Pennsylvania College of Technology (wastore@pct.edu).

*A Question of Command* endorses the old military maxim that “In war, men are nothing; the man is everything.” Specifically, Moyar (Kim T. Adamson Chair of Insurgency and Terrorism, US Marine Corps University) argues that the key to success in counterinsurgency (COIN) warfare is “empowering quality American or host-nation commanders” (xiv). COIN must be “leader-centric” rather than “population-centric” or “enemy-centric” (the former associated with winning people’s “hearts and minds,” the latter with killing or neutralizing insurgents). Moyar provides a common-sense list of “The Ten Attributes of Effective Counterinsurgency Leaders”: initiative, flexibility, creativity, judgment, empathy, charisma, sociability, dedication, integrity, and organization. Very few individuals exhibit all ten traits, he admits, but the best COIN leaders possess most of them.

Moyar believes his ten attributes are genetic; some, however, “can be boosted through self-improvement and practice, and senior leaders can enhance them further in their subordinate commanders by coaching and inspiring them, setting the proper command climate, and providing the right types of training and education. The case studies [in this book] show which attributes can be increased, and how” (12). The nine illustrative case studies of insurgencies, drawn primarily from US experience, including the Civil War and Reconstruction, the Philippine insurrection and the Huk Rebellion, and conflicts in Malaya, Vietnam, El Salvador, and, most recently, Afghanistan and Iraq. The last chapter, “How to Win,” is a primer on the recruitment, selection, training, and empowerment of leaders for COIN operations.

Moyar writes what might be termed “applied” history. Through his case studies, he attempts to show field commanders and policymakers how best to suppress insurgencies in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. His work is also that of a firm advocate: within an American military much preoccupied with technology and firepower, he means to shift the emphasis from matériel to people, specifically, field commanders advanced and rewarded for their initiative, creativity, and flexibility.

*A Question of Command* certainly makes a compelling case: success in COIN is, in fact, well within the control of military commanders with the right professional attributes and personal abilities. Thus, it would seem to follow that the United States may prevail in COIN operations simply by selecting, developing, and promoting the best leaders in both its own military and that of a given “host” nation. But, then again, all success in warfare depends on the skills and spirit of leaders. “The moral is to the physical as three is to one,” according to Napoleon, a practitioner of “leader-centric warfare” if ever there was one. Moyar is right to highlight the value of skilled commanders but wrong to reduce COIN effectiveness to an exercise in leadership. Put differently, the creation of a “super class” of leaders will not solve every strategic problem of COIN.

Unsurprisingly in a book privileging commanders and their abilities, Moyar’s “Acknowledgments” read like a “Who’s Who” of recent American senior commanders, including Generals George Casey and David Petraeus among dozens of others he interviewed. Curiously, he has little to say about the importance of non-commissioned officers to COIN or about the concept of “strategic corporals,”<sup>1</sup> perhaps because they are not “in command” in his sense of the word.

Throughout his case studies, Moyar naturally celebrates commanders who exemplify his essential attributes, even as he deplores desk-bound, paper-pushing types with little field experience who yet micro-manage much more experienced subordinate commanders. For example, he believes high-level US bungling

1. The idea that the actions of all troops, even the lowest ranking, are vital to the success of COIN. See Charles C. Krulak, “The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War,” *Marines Magazine* (Jan 1999) <[www.miwsr.com/rd/1128.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1128.htm)>.

during the Philippine Insurrection was redeemed by a system of “nearly unfettered” improvisation by local commanders (87).

One of Moyar’s command exemplars is the “enormously skillful and personable” Edward Lansdale, a “man of ideas,” not one “who clings to libraries or offices”:

He did not trust the written reports of U.S. government officials or the articles and books by American scholars who were considered experts on the Philippines. “Maybe we should be more cautious in our listening to ‘experts’ and pay more heed to how they have come to know that of which they speak,” Lansdale once said. “When was the ‘expert’ last invited to be a guest in an ‘average’ Filipino household to share a meal? When did he last spend a night with Filipinos in the provinces? Or, does he merely know Manila, the largest city, and a coterie of acquaintances?”(99)

Moyar prefers commanders who get their boots dirty, walk among the people, and lead by example at the front: free thinkers and risk takers who prize firsthand knowledge of local conditions. But how are such leaders to be identified? Moyar thinks the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator personality test might identify “intuitive-thinking” leaders for command slots, in place of “sensing-judging” commanders allegedly hamstrung by their over-reliance on order, structure, and rigid planning.<sup>2</sup> His contention that the US Marines and Special Forces have fewer of the latter than the “big” Army and are thus likelier to succeed in COIN will not sit well with the Army (262–63).

In concentrating so heavily on leadership qualities, Moyar fails to weigh properly other factors vital to COIN success. While he notes in passing the importance of reliable and actionable intelligence, close cooperation between civil and military authorities, good relations with the people, and the use of local defense forces to protect the people, even as insurgent activities are being suppressed (5), leadership remains central. The book is valuable as a stimulus to reflection on the character of leaders in COIN warfare. But an obsession with senior commanders and their decisions leads Moyar to ignore or downplay, for instance, the need to mobilize national will in support of war, the perils of fighting prolonged and unpopular wars in countries peripheral to US interests (like Vietnam and Afghanistan), and the steep costs of COIN operations not only to the United States but especially to host nations on the receiving end of American military power and largesse.

To provide one example: the case study of the Vietnam War suggests that the United States would have prevailed if only Gen. William Westmoreland had been tougher in relieving ineffective US commanders and more involved in developing effective leaders in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. Or if only Westmoreland had been more like his successor, Gen. Creighton Abrams. Or, earlier in the war, if only the United States had better understood Vietnamese culture and recognized in the early 1960s that President Ngo Dinh Diem represented its best chance to stabilize South Vietnam.

These “if onlys” ignore the larger issue of whether the Vietnam War was worth the fight to begin with. Perhaps it truly was a case of the United States using excessive means to achieve minor aims in a region of marginal interest, as Hannah Arendt claimed.<sup>3</sup> But Moyar’s determined accentuation of commanders’ attributes simply elides such broader strategic concerns and ideological imperatives.

Moyar’s advocacy of efforts to develop better leadership in the US military or in those of host nations also causes him to neglect such critical issues as enemy strengths, the economic perils and costs of war, the need to sustain home front support, and the wear and tear on personnel actually fighting long, grinding, open-ended wars. Nor does he address the morality of developing host-country leaders with the goal of relieving US forces of the burden of fighting the enemy, real or perceived. Daniel Ellsberg raised this issue with Henry Kissinger in January 1971, as the US government was pursuing its policy of Vietnamization: “What is your best estimate of the number of Indochinese that we will kill, pursuing your policy in the next twelve months?” (An evasive Kissinger refused to provide an estimate.) Again, in speaking of the Vietnam

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2. Using the MBTI assessment as a screening device would not please its designers, who view it as a tool for self-assessment and self-awareness, not a means to gauge potential or allocate promotions and similar rewards.

3. *Crises of the Republic* (NY: Harvest, 1972) 27.

War “trending down” for the United States, Kissinger “failed to mention Indochinese casualties, or refugees, or [US] bombing tonnages, which in fact are trending *up*,” Ellsberg noted. These omissions told “the American people that they need not and ought not care about our impact on the Indochinese people.”<sup>4</sup> It is telling that a concern with the underlying morality of US policy and use of power does not appear in Moyar’s “top ten” list.<sup>5</sup>

Moyar may believe he has found a way for the US military to prevail in COIN operations, but there are such things as pyrrhic victories. His over-attention to matters of leadership in the officer corps discounts larger cultural and societal forces that impinge on, constrain, and even sabotage the best laid plans of the most determined of leaders.

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4. Daniel Ellsberg, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers* (NY: Penguin, 2002) 352–55.

5. Moyar does mention a commander’s “judgment” (in avoiding collateral damage), “empathy” (in influencing the civilian populace), and “integrity” (in preventing abuses of power, i.e., atrocities), but he takes for granted the inherent justice of American COIN efforts and policy goals. For him, US armed forces are, as he states on his dedication page, “sentinels on the parapets of freedom.”