



## WRONG ANSWER

Book Review by David Tucker

*A Question of Command: Counterinsurgency from the Civil War to Iraq*,  
by Mark Moyar. Yale University Press, 286 pages, \$30

MARK MOYAR'S *A QUESTION OF COMMAND* seeks to establish leadership as the decisive element in counterinsurgency and to make the case that history is the principal means by which the U.S. military should educate itself. It fails in each of its missions. It tells us nothing useful about counterinsurgency that we did not already know and obscures what we do know. Its elevation of history and experience over political science and theory would be bad for military education and would lead to contradiction and incoherence.

Moyar, a professor at the Marine Corps University, has written his book in order to criticize recent writing on counterinsurgency, including the new and much-praised Army and Marine Corps doctrine. This recent work, according to Moyar, fails to emphasize that leadership is the key to success. Drawing on seven past and two present-day counterinsurgencies discussed in his book, Moyar identifies what he considers to be effective leadership's ten attributes: initiative, flexibility, creativity, judgment, empathy, charisma, sociability, dedication, integrity, and organization.

Moyar presents his leadership theory as an improvement over what he sees as the prevailing view, which argues that counterinsurgents must address the people's grievances. But he misunderstands this view. He writes as if addressing grievances in counterinsurgency were an end in itself, though in fairness to him, this has been a common mistake. In the United States, espe-

cially in the Kennedy Administration, the importance of modernization theory—what we now call nation-building—led some to think that counterinsurgency was a subset of modernization and that, therefore, addressing socioeconomic and political problems was the overriding goal. In fact, counterinsurgents address grievances not to build nations but to destroy insurgents. Addressing grievances helps get the support of the people, thus isolating insurgents by depriving them of that support. Information provided by the people allows counterinsurgents to kill, arrest, or turn insurgents more easily.

There is no need, then, for Moyar to present his leader-centric theory as an alternative to the population-centric theory, or to reemphasize the importance of killing insurgents, unless he has discovered something new about counterinsurgency. He claims he has. He believes he is the first to show comprehensively that leadership is decisive for success in counterinsurgency by offering a full, detailed account of what such leadership requires. But the new counterinsurgency doctrine that Moyar criticizes itself offers a full, detailed account of what such leadership requires, although one that differs from Moyar's own.

MOYAR RESTS HIS CLAIMS OF ORIGINALITY on his nine case studies, which are clearly written, rather general, and indistinguishable from typical accounts, except when he inserts a sentence or two asserting

that one of his ten attributes is responsible for some success or another. He rarely if ever provides enough detail or analysis to support these claims. For example, at one point, he criticizes a commander for insufficiently supervising his subordinates. A few pages later, he praises officers who did not micromanage their subordinates. Moyar provides no way to distinguish between bad leadership's insufficient supervision and good leadership's refusal to micromanage.

In his account of Vietnam, he notes that one program had good leaders but failed because it served a bad strategy. A few pages later, he singles out one general's ability to improve the situation on the ground but does not take into account the new strategy he employed. Successful counterinsurgency, then, rests on strong leadership *and* good strategy. So too with intelligence, which Moyar mentions in every one of his case studies, but fails again to make anything of. At one point, he writes that "understanding tried-and-true counterinsurgency principles and methods was not a guarantee of success." True enough, but given what Moyar himself reports, good leadership is no guarantee of success either. Without the right strategy and good intelligence, it will fail. Based on his case studies alone, one cannot conclude that leadership is "the principal cause of" success in counterinsurgency. Strategy and intelligence might be more important.

One reason Moyar cannot sort out the relative importance of strategy, intelligence, leader-



ship, or other possible causes of success is that his analysis is not sufficiently rigorous. He does not specify causal relations, nor does he test of any of his claims. For example, he doesn't tell us why he chose the nine case studies that he offers, except to say that they support his claims. This amounts to saying that he chose his cases because they prove his point. But the same method can prove any point.

THE BOOK'S INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER contrasts the "cerebral assumptions" of theorizing and political science with the reliable, muddy-boots virtues of experience and history. Moyer, a historian, returns to this theme in his case studies, adding a certain disdain for doctrine, which he sees as too abstract, too removed from the variations and oddities of actual situations to be of much use. Although it is possible to be too abstract, too theoretical, and even too analytical, *A Question of Command* reveals the problems with not being theoretical or analytical enough. After several chapters bashing theory, abstraction, and doctrine, Moyer concludes his book with a set of "lessons learned" abstracted from the experiences he has chronicled, and an alternative counterinsurgency doctrine, all in the name of his "leader-centric theory." To understand, we have to abstract or "theorize." The only question is how well we do it.

Moyer thus fails to demonstrate that history is sufficient for military education or for the education of any leaders. Learning and right action require a combination of experience *and* theory, of history *and* political science. Military officers are immersed in experience and history, so to speak, and need to balance that with an education in the rigors of analysis. Being flexible, creative, taking initiative, etc., is no good unless we actually know what we are doing. We won't know what we are doing unless we learn from experience. And we can only learn from experience if we analyze rigorously and theorize carefully. The ultimate leadership lesson of Moyer's book may be that the most important leadership lesson to learn is how to learn lessons.

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