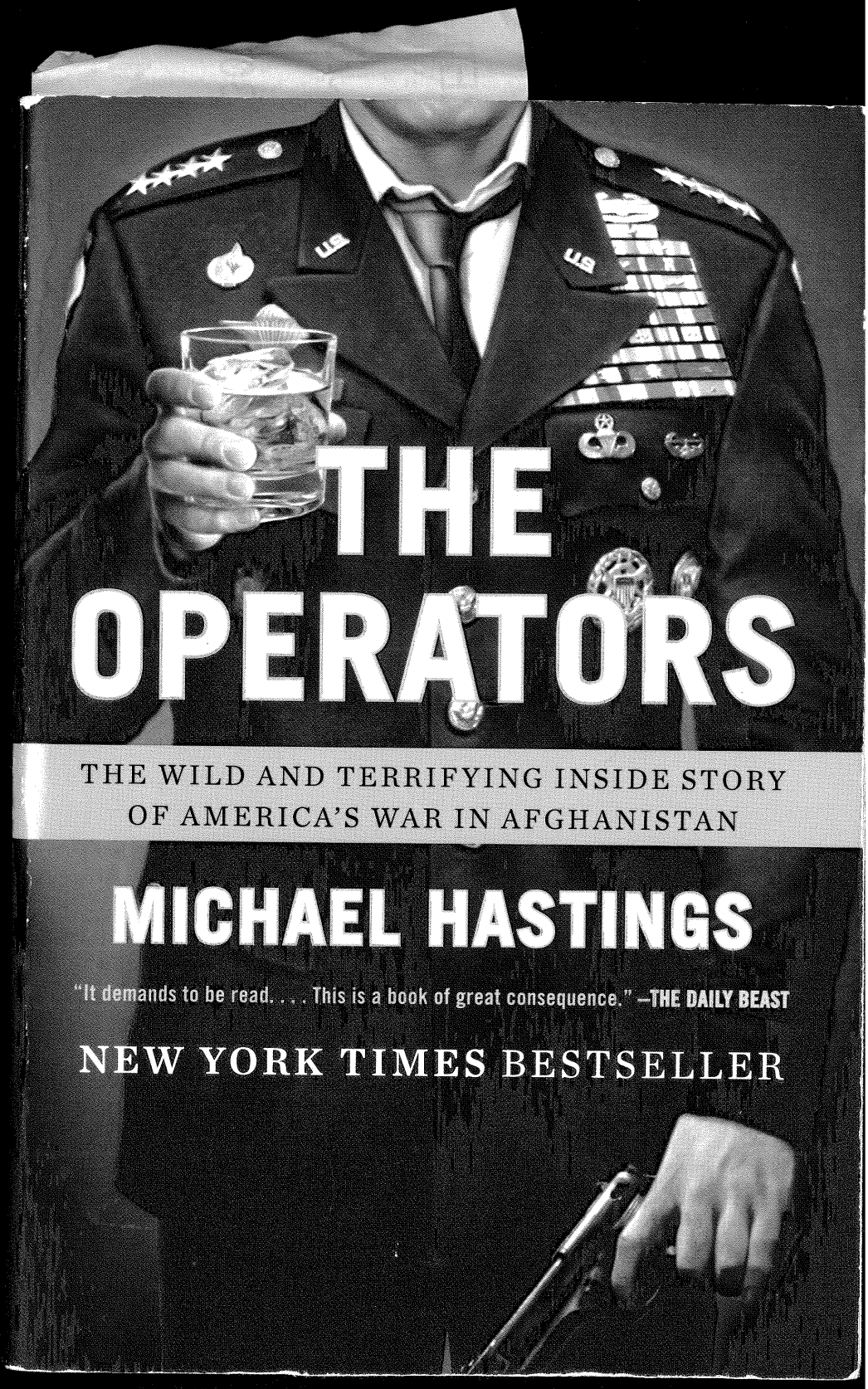
THE OPERATORS
THE WILD AND TERRIFYING INSIDE STORY OF AMERICA'S WAR IN AFGHANISTAN
MICHAEL HASTINGS
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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

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A SHORT HISTORY OF A HORRIBLE IDEA

1950–2010, ALGIERS, SAIGON, WASHINGTON, DC, BAGHDAD, AND KABUL

In the mid-1950s, a thirty-seven-year-old French officer named David Galula spends two years fighting rebels in Algeria. The rebels are trying to overthrow the colonial government that has ruled the country since the 1840s. The French will lose to the rebels in 1962.

Galula learns a few valuable lessons, though: that Arabs have a "notorious inability to organize," an observation which he apologizes for ("I sound no doubt terribly colonialist, but it's a fact"); that there isn't a good doctrine for him to follow to fight the insurgents; and, by the time the French get around to figuring out how to fight them, the war has already been lost. ("Too little too late," he'll write. "France was always several steps behind the demands of the situation on the military front.") He writes two books about his experience, one called *Pacification in Algeria, 1956–1958*, written in 1962, and another called *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, written in 1964.

If America hadn't entered Vietnam, Galula's work would have been left in the dustbin of history. Galula is part of the school of French military officers associated with *guerre revolutionnaire*. The school's ideas are

completely discredited in France. Losing three consecutive wars will do that to the military class: getting steamrolled in World War II, then getting decimated at Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam, and, finally, losing Algeria in a massively humiliating defeat, ending with the exodus of one million Frenchmen from North Africa.

Rather than accepting defeat, Galula's contemporaries in the military blame the French government for wimping out. A group of French officers form a secret terrorist organization, called the Organisation de l'Armée Secrète, or OAS, which is linked to a number of fascist groups, like Franco's Falangists in Spain. An OAS sympathizer tries to assassinate French president Charles de Gaulle and fails. The fascists in OAS promote the same kinds of theories Galula likes to write about. They're also implicated in the brutal torture regime France conducted in Algiers, which makes their counterinsurgency ideas "tainted," according to one writer.

Unable to find work in France, the French counterinsurgency gang discovers a receptive audience in America. Under President John Kennedy—concerned with figuring out ways to counter communist revolutions—the United States foreign policy and military establishment catches their first bout of counterinsurgency fever. From 1960 to 1963, there's an "explosion of interest" in COIN, writes Ann Marlowe, an analyst who's written the most definitive account of Galula's life. In 1960, Galula attends the Armed Forces Staff College in Norfolk, Virginia. In 1962, Vietnam War architect General William Westmoreland gets him a research position at Harvard, where he becomes friends with Henry Kissinger. Galula lasts a year in Cambridge before another American counterinsurgency expert—General Edward Lansdale, a man darkly parodied in Graham Greene's novel *The Quiet American*—tries to help him get a job at Mobil Oil company. Galula's career never quite takes off in Washington, though there's evidence of his thinking in some of the Vietnam War's biggest debacles and boondoggles, including the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support program (CORDS; his book *Pacification in Algeria* will be cited in a previously classified USAID study laying out the principles for the program) and the controversial Phoenix Program, which assassinates more than twenty thousand suspected Vietcong sympathizers. (One of the American minds behind the Phoenix operation, Nelson Brickham, would carry Galula's other book around Vietnam, pushing it on his friends.) Galula returns to Paris in 1964.

Over the next eight years, the United States military adopts a variety of counterinsurgency tactics in Vietnam, such as physically separating the local population from the insurgency in the strategic hamlet program, which required the forcible removal of peasants from their villages. After leaving over three million Vietnamese dead and 58,195 American soldiers killed, the United States withdraws from Southeast Asia, failing to accomplish its goals of defeating the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese. After the war ends, counterinsurgency becomes anathema in American military circles. The backlash, according to historian Andrew Birtle, was due to the fact that COIN had been "overblown and oversold." In 1984, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger pens what is seen as official repudiation of the U.S. strategy in Vietnam. The doctrine states the U.S. should only get involved in conflicts with limited engagements, clear exit strategies, and use overwhelming force. A decade later, Weinberger's policy is updated and enshrined by General Colin Powell—himself a Vietnam veteran—in what becomes known as the Powell Doctrine.

By the 1990s, counterinsurgency has been definitively replaced by a new fad of the moment, Revolution in Military Affairs, or RMA. RMA calls for using technology, not troops, to fight our future wars. Even General David Petraeus—the father of the modern counterinsurgency movement, which will find inspiration in Galula's theories—promotes technology over boots on the ground, writing a paper in 1997 called "Never Send a Man When You Can Send a Bullet." During the 2000 election, avoiding sending American troops to perform nation-building

missions is conservative dogma, leading then-candidate George W. Bush to say that he wouldn't do "nation-building." His national security advisor Condoleezza Rice would say that "We don't need to have the 82nd Airborne escorting kids to kindergarten." When both the wars in Afghansitan and Iraq begin, they are premised on this idea of high technology, low risk—quick, deadly, and keeping American troops on the ground for the shortest time possible, as was the case in the first Gulf War.

It's the decision in 2003 to invade Iraq that eventually leads to the revival of counterinsurgency within the U.S. military. A number of the military officers and advisors associated with COIN—those COINdinistas—would later say they had serious reservations about the invasion. McChrystal tells me he didn't think Iraq was a "good idea" because the country didn't really pose a terrorist threat; Petraeus would famously ask during the invasion, "Tell me how this ends?" hinting at his own suspicions. Military officials in Baghdad claim in April 2003 that there will only be a few thousand Marines in Iraq by the end of the summer, and plan to start bringing the troops home. On the ground, an insurgency is quickly taking root, though few commanders will admit it—and it takes three more years before units begin to uniformly apply principles to counter it.

As in the early sixties, the Americans find another foreigner to help them craft their theories. This time, it's an Australian by the name of David Kilcullen. Kilcullen gets flattered in a series of media profiles and becomes a top advisor to General Petraeus. Like Galula, he'll write two books (*The Accidental Guerrilla* and another just called *Counterinsurgency*) making the case not just for counterinsurgency in Iraq, but COIN in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and number of other possible countries over the decades to come. (Kilcullen, too, views the decision to invade Iraq as "fucking stupid.") Kilcullen's most formative experience, he writes, is from a few months he spent in West Java in the 1996. Armed with time in Indonesia, he's embraced by a cadre of American officers who want counterinsurgency to become the dominant force shaping U.S. military policy. One of these officers, John Nagl, writes another book that fuels

the COINdinista revolution, called *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, about the British colonial war in Malaya.

What happens next is now part of the movement's legend. Horrified by the disaster in Iraq, a group of savvy young colonels and generals spends a year in Fort Leavenworth in 2006 under the tutelage of David Petraeus, writing a brand-new counterinsurgency field manual, *FM 3-24*. The book is downloaded 1.5 million times in a month. It references David Galula's experience in Algeria forty-two times. Galula's experience—a French captain who commanded only 120 men in a lightly populated rural area in a North African country sixty years ago—becomes the model for America's new war planners.

The manual performs a rather impressive sleight of hand: tying counterinsurgency to the War on Terror. The vast majority of the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan is not against any combatant who poses a threat to the United States homeland. But to justify the tremendous outlay of resources and lives it requires to enact a counterinsurgency plan, the theorists claim that COIN, somehow, is an effective way to deal with transnational terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda. That this is patently false does not give the movement much pause. A RAND study, "How Terrorist Groups End," commissioned in 2008, explicitly points out that the best way to defeat terrorist networks is not through military force, but through law enforcement. The authors looked at 648 terrorist groups that were active from 1968 to 2006. In 40 percent of the cases, policing is "the most effective strategy," with local intelligence and police agencies able to able to penetrate and disrupt the terror groups, while 43 percent reached a political accommodation with the government. The study states: "Military force led to the end of terrorist groups in 7 percent of the cases," and that military force has not "significantly undermined [Al-Qaeda's] capabilities."

After completing the new manual, Petraeus gets picked to return to Iraq to put his revamped theory to the test. He asks for twenty thousand more troops and gets them, increasing the overall number of forces in

Iraq to a hundred fifty thousand, or a 15 percent increase. What follows is eighteen months of brutal fighting, at the cost of over one thousand American lives, and over ten thousand Iraqis killed. Behind the scenes, McChrystal, operating his own Phoenix-like Special Ops program, wipes out "thousands," according to McChrystal's deputy, Major General Bill Mayville, noting that "JSOC was a killing machine." Violence does, however, eventually decline, and Petraeus—and counterinsurgency—is able to take credit for creating the conditions for a face-saving withdrawal. COIN, it appears, is finally vindicated. The surge becomes a modern military myth, one eagerly embraced in Washington by those in the media and political world who'd been complicit in starting the Iraq War.

A closer inspection of the surge myth reveals a murkier set of factors. One of the major turning points in the war is in Anbar province, when local tribal leaders decide to turn against Al-Qaeda. This starts happening a year before Petraeus returns to command and has little to do with American military strategy. Analysis crediting the turnaround in Anbar usually ignores the reason why Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was able to establish a foothold there in the first place: American bungling for the first three years of the war. The tribal leaders welcomed Al-Qaeda to fight the American occupiers, but then realized they'd made a significant tactical error. Al-Qaeda in Iraq eclipsed the American occupation in brutality and stupidity—as one tribal leader would say, he would have "worked with the devil" to beat Al-Qaeda. The tribal leaders realized that they weren't just fighting the Americans—the new Shiite-led government in Baghdad was also keen to wipe them out. Faced with the brutality of AQI, coupled with a sectarian cleansing campaign originating from the highest levels of the new government in Baghdad, the tribal leaders, mainly Sunnis, make a desperate play: They tell the Americans that for the right price, they'd partner with them. American soldiers start to hand out bags of cash to insurgents—about $360 million spent in just one year. Overnight, former enemies who had killed Americans for three

straight years became "freedom fighters." ("They are true Iraqi patriots," as one American general will describe his former enemies.) We find a way to buy off the enemies we'd created by invading—the strategy is akin to digging a hole in the desert, then filling the hole with cash and dead bodies and calling it a victory.

In Baghdad, the sectarian cleansing campaign had already taken its toll. Over 1.5 million refugees flee the country, and neighborhoods that were once ethnically mixed have been almost entirely cleansed. The COINdinistas strive to prove the surge strategy is an enlightened form of combat—"graduate level of war," as *FM 3-24* calls COIN—but the reality on the ground is dark and not very reminiscent of graduate school. Petraeus and his allies decide to team up with a Shiite Islamist government, picking the majority's side in a civil war. The Americans themselves round up tens of thousands of young Iraqi males. The Iraqi army and police, fully funded and trained by the U.S. military, conduct a campaign of torture and killing, assassinating suspected enemies and abusing Sunnis with electric shocks and power drills, with entire units being used as death squads. The Sunnis respond in kind. The American response to this campaign, as *The New York Times* would later note, was an "institutional shrug."

In the end, the surge proved extremely flawed: Its justification, to allow the Iraqis breathing room to set up a multiethnic government, doesn't work. The Shiite government, even after violence drops to only three hundred Iraqi civilians getting killed a month in 2009—as opposed to three thousand a month in 2006—continues to go after the Sunnis. The Shiites now have an even greater edge: The names and biometrics of Sunni insurgents who had temporarily allied themselves with the Americans are easily accessible to the new Iraqi government.

None of this really matters, though, in Washington, DC, a reality of which Petraeus is acutely aware. As he'd written earlier in his career, it's not what happens that matters; it's what policy makers think happens—the key is "perception," he writes And the perception in Washington is

that the surge is a triumph. Though a political failure in Iraq, it proves a political success in Washington.

If the COINdinistas had stopped at Iraq, perhaps the charade would have held up over time. But they couldn't help themselves. With careers made by the prestige and money that can be achieved only through continuing their campaign elsewhere, the COINdinistas start talking about GCOIN, or global counterinsurgency, a worldwide fight to perform nation-building under the rubric of the War on Terror. Petraeus and the COINdinistas, with a new leading figure in the guise of General Stanley McChrystal, would soon push their theories on Afghanistan in full force. Iraq becomes the blueprint for success. The COINdinistas would, in other words, make the time-honored mistake of trying to fight the last war. "The entire COIN strategy is a fraud perpetuated on the American people," says Douglas Macgregor, a retired colonel and leading critic of counterinsurgency who attended West Point with McChrystal. "The idea that we are going to spend a trillion dollars to reshape the culture of the Islamic world is utter nonsense."

Counterinsurgency, its proponents in Afghanistan claim, is the only way to prevent "terrorist safe havens." Like "weapons of mass destruction" in Iraq, the "terrorist safe haven" phrase becomes the buzz-worthy and fear-inducing phrase to justify their plans. Though this doesn't make sense—a terrorist safe haven can be anywhere, as the September 11 attacks were planned in Hamburg, Florida, and San Diego, among other places—in order to sell COIN to the broader public and foreign policy community, terrorist safe havens become another necessary fiction. ("It's all very cynical, politically," says Marc Sageman, a former CIA case officer who has extensive experience in the region. "Afghanistan is not in our vital interest—there's nothing for us there.") Only counterinsurgency can win the War on Terror, the COIN supporters testify. "Losing wars is really expensive," John Nagl will say, adding, "And sons of bitches flying airplanes into buildings is really fucking expensive." Petraeus links the two ideas: "The intellectual construct for the War on Terror . . .

needs to be a counterinsurgency construct, not a narrow counterterrorism construct."

The escalation in Afghanistan is on an entirely different scale from the escalation in Iraq, however—it creates a new war. The surge in Afghanistan triples the number of forces and more than quadruples the cost of the conflict. Its chances of success are low, almost nonexistent. Another RAND study, "How Insurgencies End," examined eighty-nine insurgencies and pointed out that the success rate for counterinsurgencies where the government is an "anocracy"—that is, a democracy in name only, as we have in Afghanistan—has only a 15 percent success rate. "External sponsors," like Washington is to Kabul, "sometimes back winning causes but rarely emerge with a clear victory." The average counterinsurgency campaign lasts ten years—the mark this war hit in October 2011. We are now left with an entire strategic framework inspired by French failures in Algeria, an imperial war in the Philippines, a British colonial war in Malaysia, and the humiliation of Vietnam. Its proponents remain undeterred—they think it works. As General McChrystal would remind an audience in Europe, "I keep Galula by my bedside."