Guerrillas in the midst

by Jay Nordlinger

A review of The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One by David Kilcullen

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Last fall, an army of brass in Iraq briefed a few journalists in a windowless room. These were Coalition brass—men from a variety of Western countries. And around the table were about ten generals; behind them were about fifteen officers supporting them. For two hours they held forth: on how they were bolstering the Iraqi government, and how they were combating the enemy. Our men were impressively bright, experienced, shrewd, well organized, and well funded. Their briefing was something like a shock-and-awe performance.

After they were done, I posed a peculiar question: “How does the enemy stand a chance? I mean, how can they possibly hope to prevail against you? Al Qaeda doesn’t have a room like this. I assume the Shiite militias do not. Why are these people so hard to put down?” And the commanding general said, “Don’t underestimate them: They are sophisticated, resilient, and
absolutely ruthless.”

So they are. And one man who knows this very well is David Kilcullen, an Australian officer and military intellectual. A few years ago, he was seconded to the United States: as a counterterrorism and counterinsurgency adviser to the State Department, and then to General Petraeus. This reminds us of the unusually—almost uniquely—close relationship between Australia and the United States, for many generations. You may have noticed that one of the last things George W. Bush did as president was hang the Medal of Freedom around the neck of John Howard, the former prime minister of Australia. (At the same time, with the same medal, he honored Britain’s Tony Blair and Colombia’s Álvaro Uribe.)

Kilcullen has written a book called The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One. And, as you remember, the Cold War featured many small wars—and less-small wars—in the midst of that big, overarching one. What of “the accidental guerrilla”?

That is Kilcullen’s term for the fighter who does not really wish to harm the West or subjugate other people, but who gets caught up in the current global conflict anyway—and on the wrong side. What happens is this: Al Qaeda moves into his environs and establishes its hideous presence. Then it provokes some kind of intervention by the West. This, our man resents, and he winds up fighting alongside al Qaeda—“accidentally.” Our task is to wean him away or prevent him from joining up in the first place.

Kilcullen’s book is about more than the accidental guerrilla—it is about a global insurgency and how to deal with it—but the term makes a handy title. Kilcullen says, “This book … is the result of my wanderings, physical and intellectual, over the past several years.” It is part memoir, part treatise, part anthropology textbook. And it is highly interesting. There are brilliant things and questionable things, and they all make you think.

Much of the book is devoted to two “small wars” within the “big one”: Afghanistan and Iraq. Kilcullen points out that people have seen Afghanistan as “the good war,” a war truly of necessity. They also take for granted that we will win there. The media have given the impression that Afghanistan is going well while Iraq is going badly. In fact, the opposite may be true. Kilcullen says that the Afghan war is “winnable,” but requires a “concerted long-term effort,” lasting “five to ten years at least.”

And he emphasizes that many of the enemy fighters—the great majority of them—are co-optable and reformable. They can be persuaded to put down their arms and live normal, nonviolent lives. I have heard two presidents, Karzai and Musharraf, say this on many occasions. The problem is that the extremists—the to-the-death jihadists—are absolutely diabolical in their tactics. For example, they terrorize farmers into growing poppy: not because the extremists want more opium, but because the growing of poppy separates the farmers from legitimate society. When this happens, al Qaeda or the Taliban can own them.
What can the Coalition do (besides kill the extremists, which, although insufficient, is not unimportant)? Kilcullen gives the example of building a road. And what matters most is, not the road, but the process by which it is built. Anything that separates the insurgents from the people—that clutches the people to society—is helpful. Kilcullen speaks of a “political maneuver,” with “the road as a means to a political end.”

He further counsels a “population-centric approach to security”: “We must focus on providing human security to the Afghan population, where they live, twenty-four hours a day.” Is that all? “This, rather than destroying the enemy, is the central task in counterinsurgency.” I was amazed, in Iraq, to discover all that our militaries are doing there. One general told our group how hard he had worked to get Baghdadis to reopen a particular amusement park: “It was a return-to-normalcy issue.” I said, “Is that what you went to West Point for?” He grinned and replied, “We’re a full-service military.”

Kilcullen was opposed to the Iraq War, resolutely. He regards it as “an extremely severe strategic error.” What he does not address, in this book, is the issue of weapons of mass destruction: the main purpose of our going in. The civilized world was blind to what Saddam Hussein was doing; when we went in, we saw. In any case, Kilcullen believes that, once in, you must win. And he provides an explanation of the “surge” of 2007.

Later in the book, he turns to Europe, a special theater in the War on Terror. Muslims on the continent, and in the United Kingdom, are ripe for exploitation by al Qaeda. And Kilcullen says that a new radicalization among Muslims “has brought a backlash from nonimmigrant populations.” Some might argue that there has not been backlash enough. If I have read him correctly, Kilcullen favors a more gingerly approach to Muslim radicalism in Europe. I myself am not sure how the authorities, and society at large, could be more gingerly. Not long ago, London police ran—literally ran—from Islamist demonstrators who were throwing things at them.

In a final chapter, Kilcullen gives us his bedrock views. He is of the school that says we have turned a mouse into an elephant: The mouse is terrorism, and the elephant is what we have caused it to become. We have overreacted, says Kilcullen, making the terrorists bigger and therefore more dangerous than they should be. We have played a “zero tolerance” game—insisting on no terrorism—rather than practicing a more grownup “risk management.” Kilcullen quotes John Kerry with approval on this score. And it seems to me he pooh-poohs the threats against us, sometimes sarcastically—for example, “[T]he 2001 anthrax attacks in the United States killed a grand total of five.”

Reading Kilcullen, I was reminded of a clear lesson from the Cold War: Finland was “Finlandized” instead of Sovietized only because it fought like hell against being Sovietized. Finland did not set Finlandization as a goal; it resisted Sovietization with all its might—and wound up, best-case scenario, being Finlandized (that is, retaining national sovereignty while having to toe the Soviet line in foreign policy and some other respects). Perhaps only by trying for no terrorism can we
achieve an “acceptable level” (shudder-making phrase) of terrorism.

Kilcullen is also of the school that says we are in danger of losing our soul as we fight the War on Terror. Our efforts to combat terrorists will turn us into monsters, and cost us our democratic liberties. I must say, I have always thought this concern unfounded; Kilcullen did not budge that thought. And he leans on that cherished quote of John Quincy Adams, more than once: America “goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy.” But as Richard Brookhiser and others said on 9/11 and after: The monsters have come to us. And some of us think that they have not come back to us in similar fashion in part because of our furious efforts abroad.

To me, there are many annoying and objectionable things in this book: I will cite just a few of them. Throughout, Kilcullen puts the term “war on terrorism” in quotes, and those quotes are sneering. Sometimes he says “so-called war on terrorism.” Okay, he doesn’t like this term, thinking it stupid. What would he like to say instead? He comes up with no substitute—he just keeps sneering. He is also capable of writing such sentences as “[In invading Iraq, we set out to re-make the Middle East in our own image ...” I doubt a single human being had this intent; the sentence is unworthy of Kilcullen.

Sometimes there is a mood of “I told you so,” which is always unbecoming (even if true). And the author likes to paint himself as the one native-knower—the Malinowski of the warrior class—amid oafish and insensitive palefaces. This, too, is unbecoming (even if occasionally—occasionally—true).

Yet this is a fine book, and, what’s more, a contribution to what Kilcullen hates to call the War on Terror. He is a smart, smart guy. There are other smart guys—and they should all be taken into account, as we proceed in a vexingly difficult war.

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His podcast with The New Criterion, titled “Music for a While,” can be found here.

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