We are always happy when we receive responses to the essays we publish in e-flux journal *that are as rigorous as Rijin Sahakian's excellent reply to Nato Thompson's "The Insurgents, Part 1: Community-Based Practice as Military Methodology." It should be pointed out that Sahakian refers here only to the first part of Thompson's essay, and the second part will be published in our November issue. It is also worth mentioning that neither the author nor e-flux advocate the activities of US military, while we do accept that they exist and that their methods are becoming frighteningly more relevant beyond military application alone.*

– Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Anton Vidokle

Rijin Sahakian

A Reply to Nato Thompson's "The Insurgents, Part I"

> This is a story about counterinsurgency as well as community organizing. It is a story about getting to know people as an occupying force, and getting to know people as neighbors. It is a story, ultimately, about the military entering the terrain of that thing called culture.
> – Nato Thompson, "The Insurgents, Part 1: Community-Based Practice as Military Methodology," *e-flux journal* no. 47 (September 2013)

In his essay discussing US military methodology, its tactics on the ground in Iraq, and its effects on culture and community organizing, Nato Thompson weaves together a familiar "story." Rather than rigorously investigating the many complicated issues that have emerged from Iraq, Thompson chooses to sublimate Iraqi experience and intellectual production by privileging a military doctrine. The reshaping of events and omitting of facts throughout the piece serve as an example of the enormous success that the US military has had in ensuring that its narrative of the Iraq War is not only accepted, but is disseminated as widely as possible. This is particularly discouraging considering the essay's publication in *e-flux journal*, generally regarded as a critical site for an array of writing on arts, politics, and culture.

If the piece were simply naive, one might be able to write it off as a misguided attempt to raise the profile of community activism by putting the weight of the military's uses and acknowledgement of culture behind it. However, a much deeper set of problems quickly surfaces. Working from General David Petraeus's authorship of the updated *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (*FM 3-24*) and brief stint in Mosul, Thompson attempts to bring in comparisons to the actions of social movements worldwide. In doing so, Thompson cobbles together at best a

series of flimsy linkages, at worst a dangerous misappropriation of the experiences of the actual populations and communities he uses as evidence, from African Americans in Oakland to civilians in Baghdad.

Thompson's disingenuous claim – "If we can stomach it, we might examine the tools of social organization deployed by the largest military in history" – rests on his "story" about how these tools included effective reconstruction projects that provided a means to organize and mobilize populations. Attempting to draw a comparison between the US military and the Black Panther movement, Thompson goes so far as to say that the non-lethal use of shotguns by the Panthers at the California State Assembly in 1967 was a means to protect the population in the same vein as the US military's counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy. He then tries to use the extensive social development work of Hezbollah in Lebanon as another comparison to the US military's COIN strategies, concluding that "meeting the needs of the people is a key weapon in the war for hearts and minds." The glaring caveat here is that the US military neither completed development projects that might "meet the needs of the people" in Iraq nor did it protect the population (whether Iraqis or African Americans).

The vast sums spent on "reconstruction" in Iraq have been widely exposed as embezzling projects with almost no accountability and few actual results. The spending and misappropriation of billions of dollars ushered in unprecedented corruption and one of the most effective *de*construction campaigns of a modern nation state. By no means a healthy country in the sociopolitical sense prior to the invasion, since the occupation Iraq has gone from being a nation with one of the highest regional levels of education and healthcare to a country marked by plummeting literacy rates, daily electricity shortages, a water crisis, abysmal healthcare, extremely high rates of disease and birth defects, and one of the youngest populations in the Middle East due to the decade-long spike in death rates and exodus of those of adult age. It hardly bears mentioning that the sociopolitical climate saw no improvement.

The tools of social organization that have actually been used by the US military in the communities Thompson references have been employed to divide and destruct to the point where they can no longer function as cohesive social units or with any indigenous power, making it far from clear why Thompson would choose to compare the work of the foreign occupation of Iraq with these two indigenous movements.

Insisting that this "story" does not pretend any causal connection between the world of the military and that of nonviolent community organizing, Thompson claims that the US military, because of its sheer scale and massive budget, is simply "not a bad place to look for new ideas and new methodologies concerning tactics for 'getting to know people.'" These "new ideas and methodologies" are taken largely from the superficial acceptance of *FM 3-24*/COIN as having been implemented benignly in Iraq through its "two strains of thought: protecting the people as much as possible, and learning and adapting faster than the enemy."

In a gross oversight of context, Thompson takes literally the words of the manual, rather than actual military practice in Iraq, stating that with these "new techniques ... the US military replaced knocking *in* doors with knocking *on* doors." These new techniques are widely attributed to *FM 3-24* author General Petraeus, who is mythologized in the essay as a torchbearer for new cultural and tactical shifts within the military and on the ground in Iraq during the occupation. In the essay's description of Mosul under Petraeus, he is described as having moved the city forward by reopening factories, holding elections, and building an "interpersonal connection between soldiers and residents of the city."

Thompson suggests that soldiers walking through Mosul, "like cops on the beat," as Petraeus puts it, evince this connection between soldiers and residents. In doing so, the author displays no understanding of what "cops on the beat" are like to citizens of occupied or marginalized communities. The incarceration rates of African American men in America or the NYPD's stop-and-frisk policy, not to mention the recent violent arrest of six students protesting the appointment of Petraeus as a professor at CUNY, should give some notion of how occupying soldiers as "cops on the beat" might not seem like a welcome shift for Iraqi civilians.

Instead of acknowledging the well-documented, illegal imprisonment and torture system built in Iraq under the leadership of Petraeus, Thompson takes the friendly neighborhood cop on the block fantasy a step further: citing Baudelaire, he waxes poetic about these soldiers who "drift through the ruins of a city, knocking on doors, getting to know people, and becoming faces with names." Indeed, the idea that Petraeus was responsible for a shift to "knocking *on* doors rather than *in* doors" would be laughable were it not such a gruesome attempt to twist facts.

The reference to knocking in doors refers to the terrifying nighttime raids of Iraqi civilian homes by armed US soldiers and their dogs in Iraqi cities, including Mosul, during the occupation. Petraeus's *FM 3-24* purposefully

steered clear of any reference to searches of Iraqi civilian homes, and did not produce any change in these raids. Raids that resulted in the abduction of thousands of fathers, sons, and husbands from their homes, heads bagged, and imprisoned based on subjective evidence, if any at all, let alone transparent avenues for defense or release.

Thompson erroneously depicts *FM 3-24*'s shift from "straightforward killing to transforming popular perceptions" as one aimed towards the Iraqi populace, rather than to American public opinion. He writes that what makes the "manual so fascinating" is its references to the "great books on war," though any number of elementary political science papers might allude to *The Art of War* or *On War*. What Thompson seems to have missed in his enthusiasm for *FM 3-24*'s supposed cultural leanings, or what he is actually following quite closely, is the manual's section on popular perception and media: in an explicit nod to the importance of narrative building, the manual urges commanders to ensure that the military/counterinsurgency perspective is enforced by stressing a directive to "engage the media, create positive relationships, and help the media tell the story."

Petraeus cannily implemented this strategy to write *FM 3-24* and build support for positive media coverage of it. During its drafting stages, Petraeus brought in one hundred civilian journalists, scholars, and intellectuals to partake in the process. This no doubt helped to ensure that the US military line of positive action in Iraq was towed – journalists and scholars could busy themselves with words on a page, effectively becoming stakeholders in the manual, instead of looking at the actual tactics being implemented on the ground in a bloody and illegal war rapidly eradicating a population of Iraqis and their domestic infrastructures.

One of General Petraeus's pivotal roles in Iraq was to act as a savvy, camera-friendly figurehead serving the US military and media's campaign to provide a much-needed positive spin on its fledgling war. Thompson takes this spin a step further, with his glowing section describing Petraeus's tenure in Iraq, "Peaches: The Mayor of Mosul," accompanied by an image of a smiling Petraeus buying "local food" from a young Iraqi boy selling bread in Mosul. The public relations image is reminiscent of many put forth by the US military, as is Thompson's description of Petraeus as "an avid jogger, a survivor of a bullet wound to the chest and an accidental fall from a parachute ... as hardworking as he is ambitious ... With his lean, sinuous, muscular build, David Petraeus is a rugged peach." A rugged peach indeed, Petraeus was most likely brought in as a singular hope by a massive military machine not to shift the actual tactics of the war but perceptions of it.

The actual tactics of Petraeus under the US military warrant closer examination. Thompson attempts to make the case that

> the stunt in Mosul worked ... Acting as the mayor of Mosul allowed Petraeus to organize civic life. In so doing, he temporarily provided the civic infrastructure that his very government had so cataclysmically disrupted. Yes, this is ironic. But such irony is more often the rule than the exception in modern warfare.

Yes, it is certainly ironic that Petraeus would be described as providing civic infrastructure to Iraqis. Perhaps more ironic still is that one of the countries that Thompson cites as an example of this new people-centered approach is El Salvador, where counterinsurgency tactics using death squads and torture were first honed by the US military under the direction of US Special Forces operative James Steele. Petraeus visited Steele in El Salvador in 1986 where he advocated his counterinsurgency methods, and in US-occupied Iraq these methods were implemented directly under their dual leadership.

Far from successfully building schools, hospitals, or providing security, the realities of the COIN and *FM 3-24* legacy maintain an outsourced policy of torture and death squads that continue to terrorize Iraqi civilians to this day, and which, at their height, left three thousand Iraqis dead on a daily basis. Shortly after Petraeus was put in charge of training Iraqi forces, the US military command issued FRAGO 242, which stipulated that "no investigation of detainee abuse by Iraqis was to be conducted unless directed by the headquarters of the command." This provided a clear path for absolving US command of guilt in training Iraqi forces to use torture on other Iraqis. Perhaps this is what Thompson refers to when he speaks of Petraeus as being busy "fighting the bad guys," who are, of course, Iraqis without specificity. Thompson perpetuates, rather than problematizes, a dangerous dichotomy that accepts the label of "bad guy" applied to any Iraqi resisting American occupation in any form.

Thompson stresses that the effort to "gain the hearts and minds of the people ... isn't just a public relations effort. More broadly, it is a massive pedagogical program – supported by guns." Petraeus's response to Iraqi torture victims being paraded about on reality television might offer illuminating evidence of this "pedagogical" campaign. *Terrorists in the Hands of Justice* was an Iraqi reality television show,

broadcast on Al Iraqiya, a state-run network set up by the US occupation authority in 2003. The show raised the ire of the Iraqi public when it showed torture victims from Petraeus's Special Commando Unit detention centers. It was only then that Petraeus insisted not that torture practices be halted, but that the torture victims not be shown on television. If the innovative new counterinsurgency practices include "a massive pedagogical program" that omits torture, corruption and indiscriminate killing from the public list of practiced tactics employed to "gain hearts and minds," then it is one deployed by Thompson and Petraeus both to make their respective cases.

Finally, in light of the essay's placement in an arts journal, and its professed concern with US military strategy, there is strangely no mention of the massive cultural cleansing campaign that took place in Iraq during and after the occupation. Thompson avoids the most crystal-clear piece of evidence pointing to the obvious importance the US places on cultural narratives in the sites it conquers. This could not be made more explicit than in Iraq, where under the US occupation, museums and galleries were looted and remain closed; public statues, libraries, and artworks were destroyed; and artists, professors, and intellectuals have been targeted, assassinated, and exiled. One of perhaps the oldest narratives shared by the world – Babylon and its ancient ruins – was irrevocably damaged when the US decided to use the site as a military base and parking lot for its massive tanks. Through erasure of contemporary and historical culture, this effort certainly demonstrates the importance of creating new narratives and infrastructures. If, as Thompson says at the end of his piece, "creating meaning in peoples lives also implies building a new world, whether one is an artist, activist, marketer, or soldier," without criticality, it will most certainly be a world devoid of any heart or mind.

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