



Small Wars, Big Data: The Information Revolution in Modern Conflict

by Eli Berman, Joseph H. Felter, and Jacob N. Shapiro.

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One of the promises of a well-connected world is deeper insight into problems. As the information infrastructure expands, it improves and accelerates the gathering and analyzing of information. The IBM Watson question-answering computer draws on enormous troves of data to arrive at its answers.¹ The hope is that more data and more processing power can help to crack hitherto insoluble problems. The authors of *Big Data, Small Wars* seek to apply the benefits of increased information specifically to wage counterinsurgency operations. Economist Eli Berman (Univ. of California, San Diego), security scholar Joseph Felter (Stanford Univ.), and political scientist Jacob Shapiro (Princeton Univ.) collaborated on this book as an Empirical Studies of Conflict project designed to provide data for policymakers and military planners facing threats of politically motivated violence.

The authors concentrate on small wars, in which governments and rebels fight for information that will gain them the support of the people. Their book advances case studies to test several hypotheses: secure and informed government services reduce violence; civilian casualties affect the people's support for combatants and tolerance of violence as well as changing the information flow to the government; levels of violence do not consistently correspond to economic conditions in asymmetric conflicts; and, finally, both governments and rebel groups will provide services when information is valuable.

The authors concentrate on small twenty-first-century asymmetric conflicts, using empirical analyses to support their hypotheses regarding how to approach fighting a counterinsurgency. The authors seek to move the conversation away from operations conducted by the people to one in which information helps create a more secure environment for people impacted by an insurgency.

Large infrastructure projects undertaken by governments seem to provide economic benefits to people. In population-centered counterinsurgency, such projects offer efficiencies of scale: one large project providing the right service at the right time and place can make a major difference in a counterinsurgency campaign. But the authors of *Small Wars, Big Data* caution that such projects often overlook local needs and invite corruption, thus fomenting the violence and instability they seek to mitigate.

The authors reframe counterinsurgency as a struggle for information. If a government can lower barriers and reduce risks to informants, then information will flow more smoothly, facilitating both security operations and the most effective distribution of aid. Making aid contingent on local cooperation induces people to join the government's side. Even though small projects lack economies of scale, they can still incentivize informants and gain the support of the populace because they are more easily withheld than large ones. Also, small-scale aid programs are less sus-

1. See, further, *Wikipedia*, s.v. "IBM Watson."

ceptible to corruption. Since the government can spread aid more broadly with smaller projects, it presents more targets for insurgents. That said, insurgents, being generally under-resourced, cannot attack many small targets as easily as a single large one. Since only governments with the right information can understand how to gain the people's support, the authors maintain, they should prioritize gaining information in any asymmetric conflicts.

This book expands on earlier studies² of population-centered counterinsurgency by stressing that information is the key to better understanding any given operating environment and how to secure and support the population. A weakness is its amalgamation of disparate case studies to form a unified set of recommendations. These case studies share a focus on insurgencies, but the authors neglect to explain how they reconcile differences of context, chronology, and geography. The implicit assumption here that data is neutral is a function of the political science focus of the work and does not detract from its value.

The authors cleverly cast their iterative approach to counterinsurgency in terms of sculpting a metaphorical block of marble:

we are chipping away using as tools evidence that comes from different sources. Sometimes experimental evidence is the most revealing because it sharply refutes some hypothesis, cleaving off large chunks of false conjecture. Sometimes an accumulation of observational (nonexperimental) evidence is equally valuable. Where to strike the chisel is often guided by the theory, the aspects of the sculpture we think will be revealed, but often we're guided by intuition and experience. Sometimes we just have to take the evidence offered by change and generally by the research of others. The result is a refined and highly polished theoretical figure in places and a rough piece of speculation in others. (52)

Berman, Felter, and Shapiro do not guarantee that their recommendations will bear fruit, but they make a compelling case for reassessing how to understand and conduct asymmetric conflicts.

2. E.g., John Nagle, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam: Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* (NY: Praeger, 2002), and David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2010).