

Counterinsurgency Reexamined: Racism, Capitalism, and US Military Doctrine

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Abstract: The US has been engaged in coercive projects of counterinsurgency since the Indian Wars in the 19th century. Racist constructions of the enemy have been central to this process. Counterinsurgency has called forth new waves of contestation at every juncture, which has in turn shaped the very texture of military doctrine. This article draws on archival research, historical geography, and Marxist theory to trace the dialectics of counterinsurgency and insurgency through a series of turning points in US imperial history from the development of small wars doctrine in the 1930s to renewal of counterinsurgency during hybrid wars in Venezuela and Latin America in the current conjuncture. Through a conjunctural analysis, we argue that racism performs fundamental work in achieving consent to counterinsurgency wars, allowing capitalism to survive challenges to its legitimacy.

Keywords: race, capital, counterinsurgency, Gramsci, policing, prisons

Introduction

Despite his populist appeals to isolationist sentiment in the US throughout the 2016 presidential campaign, since taking office Donald Trump has pursued aggressive foreign policies reflected in his appointment of Gina Haspel to head the CIA, his naming of Mike Pompeo as Secretary of State, and his selection of Elliott Abrams as special envoy to Venezuela. The administration has launched a missile strike in Syria, dropped the “mother of all bombs” in Afghanistan, withdrawn from the nuclear deal with Iran, supported an attempted coup in Venezuela, all as it has promoted the Heritage Foundation-backed increase in the already massive \$600 billion Pentagon budget (Bendix 2017). The increase in arrests of immigrants by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents, including the traumatic separation of children from parents now facing criminal prosecution, speaks to the multiple geographical scales on which racism, permanent war, and capitalist political economy have converged under the Trump administration. The administration’s budget purports to justify dramatic cuts in the social wage, including

environmental protections, health care, transportation, and education. When considered alongside Trump's expansion of security and the US/Mexico border wall, this spending represents the largest buildup in Pentagon and military budgets since World War II (Hartung and Lutz 2017a, 2017b).¹

The Trump administration oversees the most powerful imperialist state with the largest carceral regime and the most extensive surveillance apparatus in US and world history (Camp 2016; Camp and Heatherston 2016; Gilmore 2007, 2009:73–74; Paik 2017:4; Parenti 1999:47; Story 2019). This apparatus of state power has been formed through the broader project of imperialism in the neoliberal era, one which updates a model of counterinsurgency that has been critical to the survival of capitalism since the late 19th century. With its roots located in the bloody composition of the United States through the Indian Wars and the consolidation of US capitalism, counterinsurgency's long history is vital to understanding the interplay of racism and imperial wars in the current moment. This long history reveals counterinsurgency to be a central force in the "restoration of class power" in the face of recurrent challenges to capitalist imperialism. We argue racism performs fundamental work in achieving consent to counterinsurgency wars, allowing capitalism to survive challenges to its legitimacy. At the same time, such racist constructions have opened up new terrains of contestation on which popular movements have challenged the authority of counterinsurgency, and of capitalist imperialism more broadly. At key turning points, counterinsurgency has undergone changes in its composition and structure in direct response to popular movements (Estes 2019; Harvey 2005; Karuka 2019; Lefebvre 1976; Wall et al. 2017:6–7).

Yet even in the face of this integral relationship between counterinsurgency's nature and the insurgent movements that challenge its legitimacy, contemporary critical theories of counterinsurgency often neglect how the logics have taken hold in response to political and social movements. They promote a definition of counterinsurgency—one that proceeds without insurgency—that has been adamantly contested. As this essay argues, people's movements have resisted imperialist counterinsurgency since its inception. As such, their efforts have had global importance. Ignoring the theoretical interventions articulated by the organic intellectuals of these movements, as has often been the case, obscures the actual aim of counterinsurgency as a project to restore class power. These insurgent struggles consistently show how counterinsurgencies have come to harness the military, carceral, and political-economic in the neoliberal era. The story of these insurgencies and the circulation of their interventions point to the possibilities of alternative futures.²

In developing an analysis of counterinsurgency to elaborate the visions and theories of political and social movements, we find the writings of Italian communist theorist Antonio Gramsci especially useful. The task for historical-geographical materialism is—as Gramsci put it after he was arrested by Mussolini's fascist police forces in 1926—to specifically analyse the concrete relationships between the political, economic, ideological, and counterinsurgent forces in specific historical and geographical contexts. In particular, Gramsci argued that the situation could only be understood with precision by analysing the specific "relations of force" at "various levels", which include the economic, political, and military forces within

a society (Gramsci 1971:180). We draw attention here to the third “moment” of “the relation of military forces, which from time to time is directly decisive” (Gramsci 1971:183). Here, the relation of military force includes both a technical military dimension, and what Gramsci terms the “politico-military”, which he defines as “a form of political action that has the virtue of provoking repercussions of a military character” (ibid.). The politico-military is a crucial dimension to counterinsurgency. Following Gramsci’s (1971:215) consideration of the military as “the permanent reserves of order and conservation”, we see counterinsurgency as a vital window into what Aijaz Ahmad (2005:231) calls the “imperialism of our time”, which as he puts it, “constantly re-invents itself ... as the structure of global capitalism changes”.

For Gramsci, the study of decisive “intervals” enables historical-geographical materialists to analyse the connections between shifts in the economic “base” of global capitalism and the political and ideological “superstructure”, the “development of an organic movement and conjunctural movement in the structure”, and the “dialectical meditation between the two methodological principles” (1971:180). The analysis of the relations of force likewise proceeds through a distinction between the levels of the social formation, which represent the “conjunctural fluctuations of the totality of social relations of force” (Gramsci 1971:185; see also Hall 1986:7). Gramsci made the distinctive contribution that conjunctural analyses of situations were needed to develop effective strategies and tactics that could clarify the possibilities for change (Barndt 1989:15). Adopting Gramsci’s approach, we understand conjunctures less as periods of time and more as an “accumulation of contradictions”. Such moments represent ruptures in the relations of force, but they do not necessarily lead to revolutionary transformation. They also represent situations where class power can be restored “through a modification in the modes of hegemony” (Hall 1988:130; Hall et al. 1978:217).

In our efforts to develop a conjunctural analysis of how imperialist counterinsurgency enables capitalism to survive challenges to its hegemony, we do not limit the meaning of hegemony to consent, but instead emphasise how the concept clarifies class struggle. Specifically, by hegemony we mean a structure of social relationships and common sense language that establishes the terms through which class struggle takes place (Roseberry 1994:360–361). Counterinsurgency has constructed a common language of anticommunism and nationalism to justify its racist construction of enemies of the state, ultimately displacing more fundamental class conflicts and insurgencies. At the same time, popular movements have articulated an alternative common sense to build opposition to racism, imperialist counterinsurgency, and global finance capital. Within the conjunctural moments we identify, counterinsurgency is a window into broader projects to restore class power.

To sustain this argument, we draw on primary archival research undertaken both at Quantico Marine Corps Base and Headquarters in Virginia and the Tamiment Library at New York University. At Quantico, we target internal military publications that articulate how insurgency shaped the nature of counterinsurgency doctrine, and military thought more generally. This unusual combination of archives from the Marine Corps and radical political and socialist movements

reflects our conceptual and methodological claim that US counterinsurgency must be understood as part of global finance capital's efforts to monopolise resources, roll back socialist governments, and maintain hegemony over the global political economy. In doing so, we identify moments at which multiple forces have come together to change the terrain on which imperialists restore their class power, including the development of small wars doctrine in the 1930s and 1940s, the escalation of the counterinsurgency wars in Vietnam in the 1960s, the defeat of the US in Vietnam in the 1970s, the low-intensity war in Central America during the 1980s, and the hybrid wars in Venezuela and Latin America in the current conjuncture. At each of these conjunctures, we consider how racist constructions of the enemy have produced consent to brutal counterinsurgent practices such as terror, torture, confinement, and surveillance, as well as tactics such as sanctions, seizing government assets, and coordinated political attacks across media outlets (*Monthly Review* 2019; Khalili 2012:19; Tricontinental 2019).

In the US imperialist war in Vietnam, for instance, we describe how racism informed the very texture of counterinsurgency strategy and tactics. In particular, a series of Black GIs and draftees refused to go to war through arguments that their struggle was not in the Vietnamese countryside but in US cities, against racism, militarism, and poverty. We suggest that the increasing geographical scale of these urban insurgencies linked with the expanding anti-imperialist revolt in the Third World led to an organic crisis of Jim Crow capitalism and US imperialism. In turn, we explore how the crisis inspired a wave of national liberation and socialist movements in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and beyond (Prashad 2008:108, 113).

The revival of counterinsurgency wars in the 1980s was part of the US state's effort to resolve this crisis of hegemony for the ruling class. This political context becomes vital in a moment when the Trump administration includes advisers from the bloody counterinsurgency campaigns in Central America like Elliott Abrams, Secretary of State under Ronald Reagan who has more recently been appointed special envoy for Venezuela. Abrams amplifies the perspective of institutions such as the Council on Foreign Relations, whose current President Richard Haass, who helped ouster Saddam Hussein during the Bush administration's war on Iraq, advocated in 2018 for US-backed regime change in Venezuela (*Monthly Review* 2019). Taken together, these figures are crafting a counterinsurgency strategy to maintain class power and restore US control over one of the largest oil reserves on the planet (Kornbluh 2019). To understand the roots of this project, we explore how the defeat of anticolonial and socialist movements in the long 20th century created the political foundation upon which imperialist counterinsurgency flourishes in the early 21st century (Ahmad 2005; Arrighi 2007; Grandin 2006:5; Harvey 2003).

Counterinsurgency and the Historical Geography of US Imperialism

Past insurgencies include struggles for independence against colonial powers, the rising up of ethnic or religious groups against their rivals, and resistance to foreign invaders. (US Army and Marine Corps 2007)

When the writing team assembled the *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, it drew heavily on colonial examples from the 19th and early 20th centuries, including Nagl's writings on Malaya and Vietnam, Kilcullen on Indonesia, Galula on Algeria, and Gwynn's *Imperial Policing*, a 1930s British colonial handbook (Galula 2006; Kilcullen 2009; Nagl 2005). Yet the 1940 *Small Wars Manual*, which itself contains many of these "lessons and borrowings" from previous colonial moments, acted as a virtual blueprint for the 2006 manual. It was updated in 2014, but nonetheless looking at its origins and development is instructive for understanding its subsequent expansion (Gwynn 1939; Khalili 2012:44–64). After all, US "small wars" doctrine was established in the years leading up to World War II, prefiguring its deployment during the US war in Vietnam.

Small wars doctrine was first codified by the Marine Corps in its 1935 publication, *Small Wars Operations*. The 900-page document defines a "small war" for the first time, as a "vague name for any one of a great variety of military operations". The definition emphasises how a small war was defined by the combination of military force with diplomatic pressure in the affairs of a state that is "unstable, inadequate, or unsatisfactory, for the preservation of life and of such interests as are determined by the foreign policy of our nation" (US Marine Corps School 1935: sec. 1–1, p 1).

Each section of the 1935 manual includes an appendix of historical examples of Marine invasions to protect US property, persons, and interests (such as basing interests), including excerpts from military proclamations during periods of Marine occupations in Haiti (1915), the Dominican Republic (1916), and Nicaragua (1926). Such appendices are excised from the more widely circulated 1940 *Small Wars Manual*, erasing the specific historical geographies of imperialism from which the manual's tactics are extracted (Greenburg 2018). Yet the sites of early 20th century US military interventions are present in key pages in both the 1935 and 1940 manuals. For example, a section on quelling "riotous or rebellious behavior" among the citizenry of the occupied country advises "a minimum loss of life and property and by methods that leave no aftermath of bitterness, or render the return to peace unnecessarily difficult" (US Marine Corps School 1935: sec. 1–5, p 5). This lesson marked a departure from earlier influential small wars doctrine, such as Col. C.E. Callwell, who argued at the turn of the 19th century that the purportedly "'lower races' were most effectively impressed by force" (Hoffman 2001:37; see also Callwell 2001).

The writings of Harold Utlely, who was responsible for the Marines' small wars curriculum, mark a turning point in small wars doctrine leading up to the 1935 and 1940 manuals. Utlely wrote a series of articles in the early 1930s for the *Marine Corps Gazette*, drawing mainly on lectures "Red Mike" Edson gave at Quantico after returning from patrolling Nicaragua's Río Coco in 1928–1929 (Bryan and Wood 2015). Utlely draws on Edson's letters and lectures on Nicaragua, as well as those of Smedley Butler, a Marine major general also deployed to Haiti and Nicaragua who later described US foreign wars as a "racket" for capital (Butler 1935). Utlely describes the machine gunning of a hillside in northern Haiti during the uprisings against the Marine occupation (1919): "But that particular moment was not one in which to lay ourselves open to the charge of bombing 'innocent'

inhabitants, no matter how justified the act might be under the Rules of War" (Utley 1931:52). Conversely, Utley describes a parallel situation in Nicaragua (1928) in which the Marines could have used aerial machine-gunning in an area where Sandino had been discovered, but the Commanding General ordered troops not to fire due to the risk of killing civilians. Utley references public outcry over Marine atrocities in Haiti, making a broader point that justifiable measures in a "regular war", however "tactically sound" and "efficient", must often be eliminated in a small war (ibid.) The 1940 manual echoes a similar ethic, stating that "caution must be exercised" in a small war, where "the goal is to gain decisive results with the least application of force and the consequent minimum loss of life" (US Marine Corps 1940: sec. 1–17, p 32).

Bryan and Wood (2005:49) argue that the 1940 manual "is the Coco Patrol writ large", with additional sections on topics such as election supervision, which Edson had not addressed. Utley's series of articles in the early 1930s, the 1935 manual, and the 1940 manual are also products of other imperial relations—Haiti's imprint is equally visible in some of these documents (Hoffman 2001; Utley 1931). US small wars doctrine grew directly out of 19th century Indian Wars, and was influenced by European colonial small wars. The Indian Wars became the "necessary, if unwritten manual for subsequent overseas asymmetric warfare, in the Philippines, the Caribbean, and Latin America" (Khalili 2012:18). Yet the 1940 manual must also be placed within broader protective reactions to secure imperial power during the global anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist uprising that circulated across the planet throughout the 1930s, including within the United States (Kelley 1990).

Counterinsurgency's colonial foundations are especially apparent in the "Psychology" section of the 1940 manual, which defines small wars as "a project dealing with the social, economic, and political development of the people". Dragging colonial categories of race into US military doctrine for decades to come, the same section warns of "a strange people" who lacked "individual bravery" (US Marine Corps 1940: sec. 1–10, p 18; sec. 1–14, p 25). The manual recommends "psychological study" of the "racial and social characteristics of the people", now explicitly placed in a hierarchy of races similar to those used to justify earlier colonial occupations (US Marine Corps 1940: sec. 1–15, pp 18, 28).

The deployment of racial narratives to justify small wars doctrine took shape amidst a crisis of imperialism after World War I, which was brought about as the epicentre of finance capital shifted from London to New York and anticolonial and socialist revolutions inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution challenged capitalism as a world system (Ahmad 2005:235; Dunbar-Ortiz 2014:176; Foner 1989:13; Hart 2009:121). They were also woven into a global geography of empires in crisis, including echoes from within the British empire of similar racial narratives that were also protective of imperialist class power (Furnivall 1956). The US's military alliance with the Soviet Union in the war against fascism gave legitimacy to socialism as a viable political alternative to capitalist imperialism (Harvey 2012:8–9; Prashad 2008:45). It was in this context that the United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference was held in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire in 1944. The meetings led to the formation of the International Monetary Fund

(IMF) and World Bank (WB) and the establishment of a global finance system. Through enforcement of US financial strategies, the expansion of the US warfare state provided military protection for international finance capital (Harvey 2005:10; Singh 2004:162; Smith 2005:90, 94).

In 1947, the US formed the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which would play a decisive role in Cold War counterinsurgency.³ By demonising communist insurgencies as enemies of democracy, cutting off food supplies for civilians in villages near insurgent camps, and implementing a system of local mass surveillance, the practices and policies of counterinsurgency became institutionalised within a warfare state, especially through Harry S. Truman's ascent to the White House (Lipsitz 1994:183, 184, 187, 190; Singh 2004:163). In 1950, Truman's Secretary of State Dean Acheson oversaw the production of a report to the National Security Council popularly known as NSC-68. It outlined the new US policy of "containment" of communism that promoted increased military budgets and aid to capitalist states (Young 1991:26). It was in this precise conjuncture that containment became what Giovanni Arrighi (2007:152) described as the "main organising principle of US hegemony, and US control over world money and military power became the primary means of that containment". This principle was the basis of increased military expenditure and base construction around the world (Arrighi 2007:154; Gilmore 1999; Vine 2015).

Theorists of the globalising warfare state, such as George F. Kennan, promoted the common sense underpinning of such forms of uneven development (Arrighi 2007:153–154). In 1946 Kennan sent a telegram while working for the State Department at the US embassy in Moscow calling for the containment of communism where the Soviet Union was supporting forces against "the interests of a peaceful and stable world" (Kennan 1946). Truman deployed anti-communism to justify global US capital expansion and counterinsurgency against Third World liberation and socialist movements. Truman and his Secretary of State Acheson sought to terrify people about the threat of communism at the same time as they asserted a connection between domestic economic security and the expansion of US warfare (Arrighi 2007:176). It was in this context that the President announced the Truman doctrine, which appealed to an anti-communist common sense to secure legitimacy for policies that would have otherwise been untenable (Lipsitz 1994).

Under Truman, military spending increased from \$14 billion per year in 1950 to \$53 billion by 1953, and it stayed over \$50 billion in the 1950s (Arrighi 2007:188). Throughout this period, red-hunting and baiting were integral to the post-World War II "anti-communist settlement". Opposition to racism and imperialist war was deemed subversive. Black communist, feminist, and anti-imperialist organisers such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, Eslanda Robeson, Claudia Jones, and William L. Patterson faced arrest, incarceration, and deportation. Materialist critiques of Jim Crow racism and its articulation with imperialist war were depicted as "un-American" during the Red Scare amidst a broader criminalisation of dissent. This anticommunist settlement created a vacuum in which imperialist counterinsurgency would flourish (Camp 2016:149; Munro 2017:158–202).

In his 1961 farewell address, President Dwight Eisenhower warned that the US should “guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence ... by this military industrial complex”. He argued that the increasing connection between the state security apparatus and the arms industry should compel a reckoning with how the \$50 billion annual military budget put the US on the path of permanent war (Foner 1989:12; Gilmore 2005; Lipsitz 1994:183, 184, 187, 190). In the early Cold War period, we have seen how racism was central to a common sense understanding of anti-communism that promoted imperialist wars and protected finance capital’s interests. The following section moves to the escalation of the US war in Vietnam in the 1960s as another key turning point at which struggles against racism, capitalism, and imperialism at different geographical scales became powerfully intertwined.

The “New Frontier”: From Small Wars Doctrine to Counterinsurgency During the Vietnam War

My fight is in the ghettos of Philadelphia—not in Vietnam! (Pvt. Ronald Lockman, October 1967)

It’s the toughest job ever assigned to any Lieutenant in any war that was ever fought. How do you fight the V.C. and win the hearts of the people at the same time ... (“Platoon Leader’s Personal Response Notebook”, Air Ground Team, Marine Amphibious Force, 1967)⁴

John F. Kennedy popularised the term counterinsurgency in 1961, though the practice had a much longer imperial history. During his 1960 campaign for the White House, Kennedy revived the language of the “new frontier” in response to the economic crisis of the late 1950s. This narrative described his political program to treat the rest of the world as a frontier of US imperialism, which, as historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz has shown, was based on a template provided by the occupation of Indigenous lands in North America. Once Kennedy took office, counterinsurgency warfare in Vietnam became emblematic of US imperialism’s “new frontier”. The US began deploying an increasing number of troops after “a decade of covert counterinsurgency” and support for the French colonial occupation. When Kennedy took office in 1961, 800 military personnel occupied South Vietnam. This number grew to over 16,500 by the time of his assassination in 1963. Throughout the period, however, widespread global resistance met the expansion of the racist and imperialist war (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014:177–179; Foner 1989:12–13; Slotkin 1998:349; Young 2009:162).

One articulation of increasingly globalised resistance to racism and US imperialism came from a group of Black and Latino GIs who refused to go to Vietnam on the basis of their critique of racism, militarism, police violence, and poverty. Ronald Lockman was a 23-year-old Black GI who, in 1967, publicly refused to go to Vietnam. In an interview for a pamphlet published by a W.E.B. Du Bois Club of America, Lockman explained his refusal to go to war: “Vietnam only benefits the power structure and the rich capitalists who run our system. I can’t see any

benefit for the people ... All the war means for a young worker is the chance to be drafted and shot".⁵ The pamphlet was designed to spread awareness of Lockman's case—part of a larger effort that successfully pressured for Lockman's release from a military stockade in San Francisco in the form of letters, protests, demonstrations, and a sit in of Black women arrested in front of the stockade. For 25 cents, one could support the cause with a "he won't go, we won't go" button.

Quoting Lockman on his fight being at home in Philadelphia, the pamphlet describes how Lockman's enemies are not the Vietnamese people fighting for self-determination, but "racism, police terror, unemployment, slum housing and ghetto education, poverty—the oppression that black people face in America".⁶ Lockman's concise statement of his "real enemies" brings together racism, policing, and surveillance, with global militarism and political economy. Lockman was part of growing GI resistance on the part of Black soldiers and Marines who increasingly viewed the imperialist war as a reflection of racism and capitalism in North America (Robinson 2000).

Using the slogan, "I follow the Fort Hood Three", Lockman placed himself in line with three Fort Hood GIs who had, in June 1966, refused to board their ship for Vietnam on the grounds that the war is "illegal, immoral, and unjust" (Lockman 1967).⁷ At the same time as the three GIs publicly refused embarkation orders, their attorney filed an injunction suit against Robert McNamara, citing the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1925, the United Nations Charter, the Geneva Agreements of 1954, and the Nuremberg Judgments as bases for the Vietnam War's illegality.⁸ The Fort Hood Three announced their refusal to go at a press conference in New York called by the Fifth Avenue Vietnam Peace Parade Committee, attended by Stokely Carmichael, chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and Lincoln Lynch, public relations director of Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). The press conference represented the coming together of peace and freedom struggles in this period, which was significant for breaking with the anticommunist settlement that had flourished since the late 1940s (Camp 2016:149; Munro 2017:158–202).

At the press conference, one of the Fort Hood three, Dennis Mora, gave a speech in which he elaborated the relationship between racism, imperialism, and class exploitation, speaking of how, "as a Puerto Rican the first war I knew was against the poverty of Spanish Harlem". In turn, he explained that, the "first uniform I knew was that of a cop on the corner. He was there to let you know that you could only look at the clean world outside as a prisoner looks from his cell. The billy clubs told us to keep our place".⁹ Mora spoke of how "the war we must fight" was not the US war in Vietnam but a war against a world in which his peers were made to "feel ashamed of their color, language, and culture", a war to reconstruct job opportunities, education, and social educational services.¹⁰ The Fort Hood Three were all court-martialled, convicted for insubordination, and incarcerated for between three and five years at Fort Leavenworth.¹¹ Mora, Johnson, and Samas were some of the very first active-duty GIs to refuse to go to Vietnam. Their resistance was part of a broader landscape of anti-war activism met with surveillance and potential incarceration.

Mora and Lockman are lesser-known figures proclaiming the argument more famously articulated by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr in his 4 April 1967 Riverside Church address in New York City, popularly known as his “Beyond Vietnam” speech. Exactly one year before his assassination, King argued that the US war in Vietnam sustained and justified policing in US cities. King spoke of how he had begun to see racism and war as political expressions of capitalist imperialism (Inwood and Bonds 2016:522; Jackson 2007). He described how in Vietnam, “soon the only solid physical foundations remaining will be found at our military bases and in the concrete of the concentration camps we call ‘fortified hamlets’”, at the same time as he spoke of “the black young men who had been crippled by our society” shipped 8000 miles away, “devastating the hopes of the poor at home”.¹² Like Mora and Lockman’s critiques, King’s speech connected structural racism to US imperial wars around the planet. So too did SNCC’s earlier antiwar statement following the murder of Sammy Young Jr, a Navy veteran, civil rights activist, and Tuskegee University student murdered for attempting to use a whites-only gas station.

King received a standing ovation at Riverside Church, but was condemned across the political spectrum and in the press. *The New York Times* called King’s remarks “facile” and “slander”, writing that the moral issues in Vietnam “are less clear-cut than he suggests” and warned that “to divert the energies of the civil rights movement to the Vietnam issue is both wasteful and self-defeating” (Garrow 2017; *The New York Times* 1967). In 1965, President Johnson had personally asked King not to speak out against the US war in Vietnam. The “Beyond Vietnam” speech challenged the prevailing liberal common sense that civil rights activists must preserve a “coalition” with the Democratic Party and President Johnson (Jones 2017). The organisation King had founded a decade prior—the Southern Christian Leadership Conference—discouraged his activism against the war in Vietnam, as did the NAACP.

While many of his former liberal allies decried King for straying from a domestic struggle against Jim Crow, he breached an anti-communist settlement in revealing the links between racism, capitalism, and imperialist counterinsurgency. His intervention suggests how a purportedly race and class neutral Cold War ideology of national security captured the common sense. These counterinsurgent manoeuvres undermined radical critiques of Jim Crow capitalism and imperialism by intensifying repression at the same time as Lyndon Johnson’s administration made civil rights concessions to liberal organisations like the NAACP (Camp 2017:12–13). Indeed, King made these interventions at the same time that he and his allies were subjected to increased police, FBI, and military surveillance through its counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO). Its director J. Edgar Hoover oversaw what historian Michael Honey describes as “a round-the-clock surveillance program to destroy King”, a determination that only increased as he spoke out against the anti-communist war in Vietnam. In a clear use of countersubversive tactics, FBI agents followed him, tapped his phones, bugged his hotel rooms, and generally disrupted his efforts to build alliances between Black freedom, peace, and labour struggles (Honey 2007:91).

To be sure, Dr. King's leadership inspired new struggles to end the Vietnam War and confront imperialism. For example, soldiers articulated moral critiques of the US war in Vietnam, and of the role of racism in soldiering. Many Black GIs drew connections between racism, capitalism, and militarism in the US and the world. A 1970–1971 Pentagon survey suggested that at least half of low-ranking soldiers in this time period had engaged in direct dissent during these years, ranging from producing antiwar literature, to organising peace marches, to fomenting rebellion within military prisons. These actions were met with surveillance, harassment, and policing.¹³

Military training documents from this period must be read in the context of such resistance. A series of "Tactical Trends and Training Tips" published by and circulated within the Marine Corps from 1965 to 1970 focuses on aspects of counterinsurgency such as "Civic Action", "Revolutionary Development", and information about linguistic, religious, and cultural customs, alongside sections on aviation operations, communication equipment, and mining. The pamphlets advise, "each copy of Tactical Trends and Training Tips is meant to be read by ten Marines—Pass it on!". One 1966 pamphlet constructs a narrative of Marines gaining the trust of Vietnamese villagers through civic action programs, describing how:

now it is not unusual to see Marines working side by side with South Vietnamese on some project that will help a village, hamlet, or population. Playing ball with or listening to a Marine's radio had provided the South Vietnamese with a sense of trust and confidence in Marines.¹⁴

The pamphlet goes on to recall how this "sense of trust and confidence" led to intelligence gains such as villagers identifying Viet Cong or booby-trapped areas. The "trust and confidence" portrayed in these pamphlets is at sharp odds with the broader context of abuse, forced displacement, imprisonment without due process, torture, and sexual violence, summed up in the order one ranking officer gave to his Army unit in 1968 to "kill anything that moves" (Turse 2013:20).

Under the header, "Help the People Help Themselves", the same pamphlet encourages Marines to emphasise villagers' ownership over local improvement projects. Taken on their own terms, military "Civic Action" programs seek to win the allegiance of the population through the winning of "hearts and minds". Yet, the tenor of training documents from this period also suggests counterinsurgency has acted, or attempted to act, as an anaesthetic against critiques of warfare from within military ranks. Vietnam-era military trainings' emphasis on testimonies such as the following change the narrative of the US war in Vietnam articulated by GIs such as Mora or Lockman:

Make an extra effort to look at these villagers in the proper perspective; you have entered their village and disturbed their simple and orderly way of life. They must be made to know why you are there. They will respect you for helping eliminate the threat and terror of the Viet Cong ... Once these people understand that you mean them no harm, gradually some of them will come forward with offers of information on VC activities. Be patient and alert for this. It's bound to happen.¹⁶

The notion that soldiers deployed to Vietnam “mean them no harm”, that Vietnamese will come to understand this and supply intelligence—“it’s bound to happen”—provides one response to the resistance Mora and Lockman represented. The same era of training documents also contains a series of “Platoon Leader’s Personal Response Notebooks”, which encourage each Lieutenant in charge of a platoon to spend time talking about topics such as how to converse with a Vietnamese farmer, Vietnamese social, cultural, and religious attitudes, and local perceptions of Marines.¹⁷ The notebooks also contain discussion questions, for instance, after a vignette about a squad leader’s watch being taken by a Vietnamese laundry worker, about the average wage of a Vietnamese labourer, whether Vietnam has welfare or pension plans, and whether petty theft can be understood as a form of solatia.

The packets also include brief history lessons on Vietnam’s colonial history.¹⁸ This training document encourages a platoon leader to engage his troops in conversation about all of these issues, even using, for the history lesson, questions such as “What business is it of ours to be here?” and “Our government has stated many times that we have no economic designs upon Vietnam. How do we prove this to the people?”. It is impossible to know what conversations these questions provoked, or whether they were even used, but one can certainly imagine how such questions could have served as a release valve for would-be Lockmans and Moras, whose likely critiques of racism and war were a constant liability for the military’s “readiness”.

These stories provide insight into how massive and widespread resistance to the war in Vietnam contributed to a growing crisis of white supremacy and US imperialist hegemony in the 1970s (Arrighi 2007:155; Gilmore 2007; Horne 1999). Moving from the intense repression of McCarthyism in the 1950s, through the multiple forces of resistance captured in “1968 and all that”, to, by 1971, the crumbling of the Bretton Woods regime in part due to war spending in Vietnam, this moment represented an accumulation of contradictions prefiguring the political and economic crises of the 1970s (Gowan 1999; Watts 2001). On the global stage, the Iranian Revolution, the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua, and US countersubversion in Afghanistan came together in a moment of crisis that propelled Ronald Reagan and an alliance of rightwing revanchists into power. Reaganism articulated a purportedly colour-blind rhetoric of security and law and order to justify this project. This rhetoric helped to secure a sense of nationalist unity amidst the globalisation of capital, increasing unemployment, and a shift in the epicentre of imperialist counterinsurgency away from South East Asia toward Central America, Southern Africa, and the Middle East (Hall 1988:138–146; Hart 2009:126; Mamdani 2004:12, 63).

Endgame: Low-Intensity Warfare in Central America

The national security of all the Americas is at stake in Central America. If we cannot defend ourselves there, we cannot expect to prevail elsewhere. (Ronald Reagan, Joint Session of Congress, 1983)¹⁹

The development of “low-intensity warfare” in the 1980s was a critical turning point in counterinsurgency doctrine. In response to the US defeat in Vietnam in the 1970s, counterinsurgency was rearticulated as low-intensity conflict to resolve this crisis of US imperial hegemony (Arrighi 2007:178–179; Leogrande 1987:3–5; Prashad 2008:xviii). This project required legitimation. In the wake of US defeat in Vietnam, defence thinkers recognised that “force alone ... can never suffice to eliminate an insurgency”.²⁰ Within the broader context of the proxy wars of the Reagan era, this recognition compelled a shift in strategy, and therefore entailed a struggle over the common sense in this new historical and geographical conjuncture.²¹ The intellectuals of the warfare state rearticulated an anti-communist ideology of national security to justify counterinsurgent solutions to a crisis of hegemony. At the same time as the Reagan administration mobilised this apparently colour-blind anti-communist rhetoric, it pursued what scholars have depicted as an “unprecedented, racist assault” against poor Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities (Marable 1983:264). It was in this precise historical and class conjuncture that low-intensity conflict doctrine took shape, a project of battering poor and working people to accept authoritarian politics and austerity economics (della Croce 2019).

Consider, for example, Commander of the US Military Group on El Salvador Col. John Waghelstein’s ability to assert that from 1973 to 1983, “Counterinsurgency (CI) and Low Intensity (LIC) became non-subjects in the Army school system”. He suggests that studies of counterinsurgency were reduced at the same time as there was a reduction in the number of advisory personnel on Latin America as part of a sustained effort to get soldiers to “forget the Vietnam experience”. Yet he asserts that the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua gave rise to “a new era of Communist-led insurgency”, and provoked a return to counterinsurgency. It was in this context that the intellectuals of the neoliberal warfare state “began to revitalize its LIC and CI capabilities”. In turn, the military expanded curricula and lesson plans designed to teach counterinsurgency and, we would argue, restore confidence in the counterinsurgent project to resolve a crisis of US hegemony (Waghelstein 1985:vii).²²

Through these counterinsurgent manoeuvres, Central America became the epicentre of a struggle between US hegemony and revolutionary insurgency in Latin America (Ahmad 2008:20). Counterinsurgents focused on legitimating imperial interventions under the guise of democracy. They defined socialist governments as the primary “challenge to democracy”, in particular seeking to counter the rebel army of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in Nicaragua. Specifically, the US State Department purported that communists and socialists in the FSLN advocated violence as the only means of change, and that revolutionaries tactically exploited “political, social, and economic vulnerabilities” to turn “resentment into rebellion”. In defining the situation in this way, counterinsurgents turned the world upside down. They alleged that the United States’ goal in the region was to build “peaceful, economically healthy, and democratic societies”. Yet the historical record suggests the direct opposite—counterinsurgencies enabled antidemocratic forces to advance, led to a pacification of revolts, and sustained a terror campaign throughout the region (Grandin 2004).²³

In the pamphlet, *How Latin American Insurgents Fight* (1985), counterinsurgents depicted how the Sandinistas in Nicaragua had been inspired by socialist Cuba. It paid close attention to how they conducted guerrilla warfare as part of the effort to produce the “knowledge necessary to defeat” them.²⁴ In essence, it suggests that insurgencies in the region were fought the “same way as any guerrilla in the world”, and declared that the key to countering global insurgencies was understanding and exploiting their vulnerabilities and causing mistakes.²⁵ One of the key ways that counterinsurgents sought to cause mistakes was by sending arms and training to local security forces and police. US counterinsurgency strategy depended on local security forces and counterinsurgents in the region to undermine the revolutionary forces as part of an effort to sever the “guerrilla’s affinity with the people”. An army pamphlet concedes that guerrilla war “stands no chance of success unless it has the complete and unreserved support of the majority of the country’s inhabitants”.²⁶

In an interview, then Assistant Secretary of State under Reagan, Elliott Abrams, suggested that the US’s counterinsurgency campaign against the Sandinistas was a key to the campaign in El Salvador. In doing so, Abrams redefined the situation: “the problem is that the guerrillas ... have turned toward terrorism”. In defining the insurgency in this way, Abrams claimed that the key to containing this insurgent threat was to “assist the Salvadorians in learning counterterrorism techniques”. Abrams concluded that the US “had great success in training their army. Now the police need training to deal with terrorism” (*US News & World Report* 1985).²⁷ Abrams was a critical figure in overseeing the US training of the Salvadorian military and police who were responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. Yet he lied about the El Mozote massacre of December 1981 where almost 1000 civilians were murdered by the Salvadorian military. At the same time, he enabled the illegal shipment of weapons to Iran to fund the Contras, right-wing counter-revolutionary forces whose campaign of terror in Nicaragua was supported by US aid. Through this US support, the Contras perpetuated a decade-long war that killed 50,000 people (Fernández 2019; Sprague 2019).

Racism remained fundamental to US counterinsurgency in Central America. Rooted in the genocide of the Indian wars, counterinsurgency cultivated amnesia about the past to promote US imperialist interests in the present. Within the US, racism continued to justify the suppression of dissent throughout the 1980s. The FBI was engaged in COINTELPRO-style surveillance of the Central American peace movement including the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), which sought to halt US counterinsurgency wars (Ahmad 2005; Grandin 2006:139). During this period, the Reagan administration used racism and nationalism to justify increased expenditures for aggressive counterinsurgency and surveillance measures (Parenti 1999:47). At the same time, the US prison population exploded (see, e.g., Gordon 1999; Murakawa 2014). Despite the ostensibly colour-blind rhetoric of national security, the formation of the carceral-warfare state in this period was racialised through, for instance, the Reagan administration’s detention of mostly poor, black migrants from Haiti in a move that established the foundations for today’s indefinite detention of immigrants (Lindskoog 2018; Paik 2016). The US state invests more public money in military and prison

expenditure than any other state in the global capitalist system. In this period, racist constructions of the enemy underpinned consent to imperial counterinsurgency as they adopted new language of low intensity conflict and shifted geographies to Central America. Racism and counterinsurgency justified the construction of the largest carceral-warfare state on the planet as part of the endgame of imperialism (Camp 2017:11–29; Smith 2005).²⁸

A Conjunctural Analysis of Imperialism

It will make a big difference to the United States economically if we could have American oil companies really invest in and produce the oil capabilities in Venezuela. (John Bolton, *Fox News*, 24 January 2019)

In January 2019, the Trump administration's Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced the selection of Elliott Abrams, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, to oversee US policy in Venezuela. Pompeo declared that Abrams would be critical to the "mission to help the Venezuelan people fully restore democracy and prosperity to their country". In the wake of this announcement, the US treasury targeted the Venezuelan-owned oil and natural gas company, PDVSA, which is the majority owner of CITGO in the US, with sanctions, and the Trump administration backed a coup attempt in the country. Abrams was also reportedly linked to the US's failed coup against Hugo Chavez in 2002 while working as senior director of the National Security Council in the George W. Bush White House. During this time, Abrams also actively supported the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The objective of the subsequent war was not simply combatting terrorism, but rather the "remaking of the political geography of West Asia", restoring US capitalism's monopoly control over the oil reserves in the region, and maintaining US hegemony over the global political economy for the next half century (*Al Jazeera* 2019; Arrighi 2007:176, 177, 190; Vulliamy 2002).

The George W. Bush administration's response to the events of 11 September 2001, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the subsequent global wars on terror led to a dramatic increase in military budgets. The US spent 5.6 trillion dollars on the post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Pakistan between 2001 and 2018, outpacing previous expenditure on US imperial wars in Korea, Vietnam, and Central America. This path toward permanent war has been lucrative for the weapons industry (Engelhardt 2018; Lubold 2017; Wirls 2017). Yet this political project to expand an already massive imperialist state has required justification.

During this period, prominent academics, journalists, counterinsurgent practitioners, and human rights experts collaborated in a series of meetings at Fort Leavenworth in Kansas in the formulation of the first counterinsurgency manual since the US wars in Central America during the 1980s (US Army and Marine Corps 2007:xiv). The publication of the field manual represented an effort to update counterinsurgency to address a distinct conjuncture created by neoliberal globalisation, mass migration, and increasing social polarisation. It must also be understood as a response to the admission by 2003 that the US war in Iraq was going poorly—an effort to pose a counterinsurgent solution to a crisis of

hegemony (Gregory 2008:11). When the *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* was released, it was extremely popular with at least 1.5 million copies downloaded in the first month (US Army and Marine Corps 2007:xvii).

David Kilcullen, a primary theorist of counterinsurgency war, was top advisor to David Petraeus during the writing of the *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*. Together, theorists such as Kilcullen considered the Phoenix Program in Vietnam as a model of success, and in turn Kilcullen argued for the construction of a “global Phoenix program”, which he depicted as “unfairly maligned (but highly effective)” (Hayden 2014; Kilcullen 2004:40). The CIA-led Phoenix program in Vietnam was designed to crush the National Liberation Front. After initiating the program, the CIA handed it over to the Vietnamese National police. Through its specific strategies of policing, incarceration, torture, and assassination, tens of thousands of communist militants were imprisoned, killed, and tortured, while Vietnamese peasants were displaced into fortified compounds following forced removal from “insurgent” areas of the countryside (Latham 2000:151–208; McCoy 2006:67; Miller 2017). Kilcullen has suggested that Phoenix-style programs will be required for fighting global counterinsurgencies in a context where the collapse of the agricultural economy has forced millions of surplus workers to migrate to cities in search of work. The doctrine is shaped by the idea that counterinsurgency theory is a “guide to action”. As such, it delineates the basic theoretical framework for the imperialism of our time (Khalili 2015; Kilcullen 2004:40, 2013:viii, 20, 41, 43; US Army and Marine Corps 2007:246).

More recently, writing on the heels of Trump’s 2016 election, Kilcullen targets Venezuela as one node of global instability, prefiguring the Trump administration’s promotion of a coup attempt in Venezuela (Kilcullen 2016). In view of the historical geography of US imperialism traced above, it is worth situating these developments within a larger crisis of neoliberalism. The US hybrid wars and sanctions in Venezuela are carried out in the name of democracy promotion, humanitarian intervention, and fighting the drug trade. Yet Venezuela’s refusal to bow to the confines of the present neoliberal conjuncture effectively drives the US imperialist state’s low-intensity war (Field 2018; Parenti 2007:89; Patnaik 2019; Smith 2010; Tricontinental 2019).

These incessant efforts form the terrain that Gramsci referred to as the conjunctural, and as he put it, it is “upon this terrain that the forces of opposition organize”. Gramsci’s methodological criteria are critical for analysing the relationship between the imperialist siege in Venezuela and the crisis of neoliberalism. Writing on how one may discern organic movements from conjunctural ones, Gramsci reflected that:

Conjunctural phenomena too depend on organic movements to be sure, but they do not have any very far-reaching historical significance; they give rise to political criticism of a minor, day-to-day character, which has as its subject top political leaders and personalities with direct government responsibilities. Organic phenomena on the other hand give rise to socio-historical criticism, whose subject is wider social groupings—beyond the public figures and beyond the top leaders. (Gramsci 1971:177–178)

Gramsci conceived of the organic and the conjunctural as dialectical rather than in opposition to one another. Reflecting on Gramsci's relevance to the current political conjuncture, his warning of the focus of conjunctural phenomena on "top political leaders and personalities with direct government responsibilities" rings true of the 24-hour media cycle of Trump-related scandals. With an understanding in mind of how the organic and conjunctural come together to change the terrain, we might instead begin to map the global contours of racism, capitalism, and US imperialism, of which Trump is one reflection.

This article began with the suggestion that the Trump administration has overseen the largest increase in military spending since World War II, and argued that this expansion required justification. Throughout, we showed how the construction of racial enemies served to naturalise imperialist wars of aggression. We conclude by suggesting that the US-backed attempted coup in Venezuela represents a counterinsurgent solution to a crisis of neoliberal hegemony. That is to say, the state's objective is not merely "regime change", but rather restoring US control over oil reserves and countering revolutionary insurgencies in Latin America (Arrighi 2007:177). Given the organic movements of counterinsurgency, the resurgence of right-wing racism, and the expansion of the US imperial state, what is the crisis that will allow the Trump administration to remake political geographies and restore class power? As we remain attentive to the unfolding of such events, Gramsci's writings from the prison in which fascists incarcerated him will continue to offer valuable analytical and political guidance.

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Endnotes

¹ Defence spending and appropriations from FY2001 to FY2019 total \$4.933 trillion, averaging \$260 billion per year (Crawford 2018). As this amount exceeds the Pentagon's base budget, some of this expenditure could be shifted to clean energy, infrastructure, healthcare, education, and other social wage programs (see Garrett-Peltier 2017).

² We follow the lead of the following works in particular: Hart (2009:129); Ross (1988:11).

³ "The CIA for Beginners: 100 Questions and Answers", Phillip Agee Papers, Box 17, Folder 22, Tamiment Library, New York University.

⁴ "Platoon Leader's Personal Response Notebooks", Vietnam Collection, Box 21, Folder 10, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.

⁵ Lockman Pamphlet (1967), Pamphlet Collection, Box 118, Folder 1, Tamiment Library, New York University.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ "The Fort Hood Three: The Case of the Three G.I.'s Who Said 'No' to the War in Vietnam", Pamphlet Collection, Tamiment Library, New York University, Box 118 Folder 1, p.10.

- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Ibid: 14–15.
- ¹⁰ Ibid: 15.
- ¹¹ On the long history of counterinsurgent confinement at Leavenworth, see Heatherton (2014).
- ¹² Martin Luther King, Jr, “Beyond Vietnam”, Riverside Church, New York, 1967, in “Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Dr. John C. Bennett, Dr. Henry Steele Commager, Rabbi Abraham Herschel Speak on the War in Vietnam”, Pamphlets Collection, Box 118, Folder 1, Tamiment Library, New York University.
- ¹³ On GI and draft resistance, see Lutz (2001:139–150, 140).
- ¹⁴ “Tactical Trends and Training Tips”, (1966), Vietnam Collection, Box 35, Folder 4, Archives Branch, Marine Corps Archives, Quantico, VA.
- ¹⁵ Jonathan F. Abel Collection, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.
- ¹⁶ “Tactical Trends and Training Tips”.
- ¹⁷ “Platoon Leader’s Personal Response Notebooks”, Vietnam Collection, Box 21, Folder 10, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.
- ¹⁸ Ibid: 53.
- ¹⁹ Reagan quoted in *The Challenge to Democracy in Central America* (US State Department/Department of Defense, June 1986). Box 128, Amphibious Warfare School, LIC Case Studies, Central America, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.
- ²⁰ Bacevich A J, Hallums J D, White R H and Young T F (1988) “American Military Policy in Small Wars: The Case of El Salvador.” Box 128, Folder 6, Amphibious Warfare School, LIC Case Studies, Central America, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.
- ²¹ On the political-economic shifts leading to massive inflow of capital in this moment of US military expansion at the same time as constraint in terms of proxy wars, see Hart (forthcoming).
- ²² Box 128, Folder 2, Amphibious Warfare School, LIC Case Studies, Central America, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.
- ²³ US State Department/Department of Defense, June 1986.
- ²⁴ Pamphlet No. 381-2 (Department of the Army, March 1985) i, ii. Box 127, Folder 4, Amphibious Warfare School, LIC Case Studies, Central America, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Ibid: ii. On the counterinsurgent use of local forces, see Khalili (2012:103).
- ²⁷ Box 128, Folder 16, Amphibious Warfare School, LIC Case Studies, Central America, Archives Branch, Marine Corps History Division, Quantico, VA.
- ²⁸ On global counterinsurgency and US policing, see, for example, Correia and Wall (2018), Kundnani (2015), Schrader (2017), Seigel (2018), and Singh (2017).
- ²⁹ *Counterspy* (1976) Cointelpro: Psychological Warfare and Magnum Justice, Spring 1976. Box 14, Folders 31 and 75, Tamiment Library, New York University.

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