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David Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013. Pp. x, 342. ISBN 978–0–19–973750–5.

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On 16 June 2014, about fifty people died when dozens of suspected Islamist gunmen sped into a coastal town in Kenya, shooting football fans watching a World Cup match in a television hall, and targeting hotels, a police station, and a bank.<sup>1</sup> Such urban guerrilla strikes, from Libya to China, are the subject of *Out of the Mountains*.

Australian counterinsurgency expert David Kilcullen<sup>2</sup> is a confident, persuasive speaker and author. His often original ideas are born of authentic battle experiences like the following: “The RPGs passed close to the cab of the front gun truck but exploded harmlessly in the creek bed. Having failed to stop us with the first burst, the attackers had lost the element of surprise. Our patrol was now fully alert, laying down heavy suppressive fire as it rolled across the bridge. The ambushers had lost any chance of blocking the road” (4).

In his introduction, “Ambush in Afghanistan,” Kilcullen states his intention to update entrenched models of counterinsurgency to better explain how modern urban conflicts occur and how they fit into the broader spectrum of human activity.

This, then, is a book about what may happen after Western involvement in Afghanistan comes to an end. It’s a book about future conflicts and future cities. It’s about the challenges and opportunities that population growth, coastal urbanization, and escalating connectivity are creating across the planet. And it’s about what governments, cities, communities and businesses (and, of course, the military) can do to prepare for a future in which all aspects of human life—including, but not only, conflict, crime and violence—will be crowded, urban, networked and coastal. (16)

The book’s title is taken from Osama bin Laden’s instruction to his son, Omar: “You must memorize every rock on the route to Pakistan. We never know when war will strike. We must know our way out of the mountains” (18). Kilcullen suggests that manned aircraft and drones have rendered deserts, agrarian landscapes, and mountains unsafe for terrorists, who have consequently relocated to safer havens in sprawling cities—particularly port cities. In such urban venues, terrorists are fully exploiting modern technology, social networks, and established criminal infrastructures. Unfortunately, well intentioned Western assistance to the inhabitants of these cities can often make matters worse: “No external aid is neutral: a sudden influx of foreign assistance creates a contracting bonanza, benefiting some at others’ expense, and in turn provoking conflict. Likewise, it creates spoils over which local power brokers fight for personal gain, to the detriment of the wider community, and can contribute to a sense of entitlement on the part of the locals” (14).

Chapter 1, “Out of the Mountains,” highlights the spectacular population growth expected by 2050 in lower-income areas of Asia (up 1.7 billion), Latin America/Caribbean (up 200 million), and Africa (up 800 million) (29). This expansion will be concentrated in a few cities whose infrastructure will be overwhelmed; Kilcullen also foresees a tendency for these rapid changes to occur in coastal cities, a process known as littoralization (30).

In his second chapter, “Future Cities, Future Threats,” the author advances his argument by an examination of the terrorist attack on Mumbai in 2008, the American attempt to capture the Somali warlord Mohammed Farah Aidid in Mogadishu in 1993, and events surrounding US efforts to extradite drug baron

1. See Isma’il Kushkush and Dan Bilefsky, “Coast Town Is Attacked in Kenya; Dozens Die,” *NY Times* (17 June 2014) A12.

2. Founder of Caerus Associates, a strategy consulting firm, he served for twenty-five years as a soldier, diplomat, and policy adviser for both the US and Australian governments—see for details *Wikipedia*, s.v. “David John Kilcullen.” He has written two previous influential books: *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2009) and *Counterinsurgency* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2010). He also worked on the US Army’s Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency* (Dec 2006).

Christopher “Dudas” Coke from Jamaica in 2010. All but one of the Mumbai attackers were killed, but Kilcullen does not judge their attack a failure, especially by comparison with the American disaster in Mogadishu. After describing both events in detail, he concludes that the Mumbai terrorists—unlike the Americans in Somalia—understood and took advantage of the characteristics of the modern megacity.

Once they landed in Mumbai, the terrorists also exploited the connected, networked nature of the urban environment. They used Skype, cellphones and satellite phones to connect with their handlers in Pakistan, who in turn monitored Twitter, news blogs, international and local satellite news, and cable television in real time, which allowed them to control the attacks and react as the Indian response developed.

The importance of the Karachi control node is obvious if we look at the role of Abu Dera Ismail Khan, the team leader, who died early in the operation, in a diversionary attack, a long way from the main targets. If Khan had been running the operation in a classical military command-and-control manner, it would have made no sense for him to lead a secondary attack of this kind. His place would have been with the main team at the main objective: he would have given the job of leading the secondary attack to a trusted subordinate. That he was assigned to a diversionary objective—albeit one requiring considerable on-the-fly decision making—underlines the continuous intimate control that the Karachi operations room exercised over the teams at the main objective. Meanwhile, the assault teams themselves seem to have operated anonymously, in a “flat” structure with no hierarchy among teams, each directly responsive to the command node in Karachi. The Mumbai attack was thus, in effect, directed by remote control, making the connectivity between the assault teams and the remote command center a critical element in the operation. (62)

The American Rangers who fast-roped into the dusty streets of Mogadishu, directly onto their chosen target, exhibited no such command of their environment. “Attacked from all sides by a self-organizing swarm of Somali National Alliance fighters and local citizens who seemed able to concentrate and disperse at will and to predict the task force’s moves faster than the Americans could react, T[ask]F[orce] Ranger was quickly surrounded. As night fell, the troops were trapped in a makeshift perimeter, bunkered in several houses near one of the Black Hawk crash sites, fighting for their lives” (73).

These well-developed, modern, terrorist “swarm” tactics proved a much more effective countermeasure than the Indian security forces’ conventional, ill-coordinated, response to the Mumbai terrorists. In a swarm,

Each dismounted fighter and each vehicle commander need only remember five basic rules. These rules define how the group fights at every scale (the individual, the dismounted squad, the vehicle, and the group of vehicles) and they never change, regardless of the terrain, the tactical situation, or the size of the engagement. They are: “Maintain an extended line abreast,” “Keep your neighbors just in sight, but no closer,” “Move to the sound of the guns,” “Dismount when you see the enemy,” and “When you come under fire, stop and fire back.” (84)

Kilcullen begins his third case study by quoting a cable that Isaiah Parnell, the US chargé d’affaires in Kingston, Jamaica, sent to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on 24 May 2010:

“the Jamaican Defence Force ... launched an all-out assault on the heavily-defended Tivoli Gardens ‘Garrison’ stronghold controlled by Christopher ‘Dudas’ Coke, the alleged overlord of the ‘Shower Posse’ international crime syndicate.... [Later,] heavy fighting continued in the Tivoli Gardens, and a fire was burning out of control in the adjacent Coronation Market....” [Kilcullen goes on to say] Dozens of small groups of fighters from Coke’s Shower Posse and from neighbouring allied groups were swarming toward the scene of the action—establishing barricades, ambushing police and military vehicles, and creating blocking positions to deny the government advance.... [Eventually,] the Jamaican government was mortaring, bulldozing, and assaulting its own capital, and the city was pushing back. (89–91)

In his fifty-three-page third chapter, “The Theory of Competitive Control,” Kilcullen addresses one of man’s two fundamental leadership requirements: “someone to look after him”; the second, of course, is “someone he can look up to”—in Britain, the government and the monarch, respectively. The author carefully clarifies how a range of nonstate actors or organizations seek to wrest control of a population from its “rightful” government by claiming to be “best able to look after” that population, that is, to impose law and

order, dispense justice, and perhaps offer welfare. The examples discussed here span time and place from 1920s Chicago, through Shining Path guerrillas in Peru, to the present-day Taliban in Afghanistan, each with its own mix of benevolence and inhumanity.

The Taliban is of particular interest at the moment, and Kilcullen traces its history from its birth during the Soviet-Afghan War in the 1980s, “when madrassa students and their teachers from districts west of Kandahar City took up arms in reaction to the perceived un-Islamic behavior of other mujahideen, and fought the Soviets in “Taliban fronts” (120–21). The Taliban quietly dispersed after the Soviets pulled out in 1989, at which point,

non-Taliban mujahideen commanders quickly seized urban centers, expropriated economic resources (especially land), and built militias to secure their supporters and prey on road traffic and market activity. These petty racketeers, dignifying themselves as “regional commanders,” soon became local warlords. In the early 1990s many of them made deals with the post-Soviet government of President [Muhammad] Najibullah, which allowed them de facto autonomy over a patchwork of fiefdoms across the country, in all the areas that Najibullah’s government felt itself too weak to control directly.

Around Kandahar, these warlords so abused the population that the Taliban came out of retirement and fought back.... Taliban groups served as a public law-and-order force. They gained support from local communities by freeing the population from the warlords’ predation: applying rough vigilante justice, trying abusers in ad hoc Islamic courts and publicly executing them, expelling the militias, and ending the warlords’ system of institutionalized highway robbery with its shakedowns and checkpoints.... By 1994, tales of rape and plunder [at these checkpoints] had become widespread. (120)

As they expanded their area of control, the Taliban gradually evolved into a regional government. “By the end of September 1996 they had captured Kabul, where their first act—on the very day the city fell—was to torture, castrate, and hang ex-president Najibullah and his brother in a traffic circle in downtown Kabul. Thus, in its origin, the Taliban was as much an armed social justice and law enforcement movement—albeit in many ways a ferociously violent and noxious one—as a religious faction” (121).

Kilcullen sees the social justice—particularly, dispute resolution—as “the bait in the fish trap”: “When the Taliban court has reached a verdict, both parties to the dispute are obliged to sign, or make their mark, on a court record held by the local underground cell.... By recognizing the court’s authority to resolve disputes [both parties have] literally signed on to its broader agenda.... [They have] of course technically broken the law by turning to the Taliban to have [their] dispute resolved, and thus [are] further alienated from the police and the government” (124). It is then but a small step to support Taliban recruitment efforts or intelligence gathering. Provided that the Taliban court’s judgments are fair and consistently enforced, there is little incentive to discontinue such support (124).

Chapter 3 offers gruesome accounts of the methods terrorist organizations use to gain control over populations, but it also thoroughly explores more subtle techniques employed by today’s worldly-wise, technically literate terrorists. At the most horrific end of the scale, we read of the brutal attempts of al-Qaeda in Iraq to assert its will upon a country already rendered ungovernable by violent Sunni-Shiite infighting (138).

The last two chapters, “Conflict in Connected Cities” and “Crowded, Complex, and Coastal,” explore more deeply Kilcullen’s main preoccupations. While there is no conclusion per se, a long appendix “talks about how military organizations might find themselves getting sucked into conflict in urban, networked, littoral areas, what things may be like when they do, and how they’ll need to organize, equip, and operate so as to prevail there. These ideas aren’t just relevant to military leaders and planners, though—as previous chapters have shown, this sort of thing is unfortunately going to be everyone’s business, one way or another” (263). I endorse that thought and commend David Kilcullen on his well written, carefully constructed book. General readers, however, may find its depth of analysis rather daunting.