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# Sex as the secret: counterinsurgency in Afghanistan

Helen M. Kinsella\*

Department of Political Science, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA

\*Corresponding author. Email: kins0017@umn.edu

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## Abstract

I explore the construction of women as the secret for the ‘successful’ prosecution of war in Afghanistan. To do so, I take up the mobilization of gender in the US counterinsurgency doctrine as deployed in Afghanistan. I draw on the 2006 Counterinsurgency Field Manual, human rights and humanitarian reports, and scholarly works to identify and analyze this mobilization, paying attention to the colonial histories upon which COIN explicitly and implicitly relies. By critically integrating these sources and the paradigmatic moments that exemplify COIN, I demonstrate the constitutive relationship of gender and COIN. The valence of the secret – of women as concealing, revealing, being, and bearing the secret – is still a lesser explored element in the analysis of the gendering of COIN and of its ‘military orientalism’. Even as scholars have powerfully shown how, in the case of Afghanistan and elsewhere, the veil functions as an overdetermined and ‘multilayered signifier’ in its own right, symbolizing the ‘tension between disclosure and concealment that defines the dominant conception of the secret’, less subject to detailed analysis in case of Afghanistan is the ways in which Afghan women are constituted through COIN in polysemous relation to the notion of the secret.

**Keywords:** gender; counterinsurgency; secret; biopolitics; Afghanistan; women; Foucault

‘The secret designates that which is desired to be known, that which hasn’t yet been disclosed. In so doing, it presupposes a subject that desires, discovers and knows, a subject from whom nothing should be withheld’ (Dean 2002, 10).

‘If a right to the secret is not maintained, we are in a totalitarian space’ (Derrida with Ferraris 2001, 59).

‘We are not at war to pass out blankets and hugs. I need you to find out where the bad guys are, as quick as you can’ (Instruction to the Cultural Support Teams, the all-female units attached to Special Forces operations in Afghanistan, Lemmon 2015).

This article explores the construction of women as bearing the secret for the ‘successful’ prosecution of war in Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> To do so, I take up the mobilization of gender in the USA counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine as deployed in Afghanistan. I draw on the 2006 US Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual, FM 3-24, media accounts, human rights, and humanitarian reports, as well as scholarly works to identify and analyze this mobilization.<sup>2</sup> By critically integrating these sources and the paradigmatic moments that exemplify COIN, I demonstrate the constitutive relationship of gender and COIN, and trace it to the colonial histories upon which COIN explicitly and implicitly relies.<sup>3</sup> Bound up with ‘operations of power’, produced and mobilized in constitutive relations with other modes of organizing life, I approach gender as historical, performative and a realm ‘where a question concerning the relation of the biological to the cultural is posed and reposed but where it cannot, strictly speaking, be answered’ (Butler 2004, 186; Butler and Weed 2011, 8).

I build upon the work of feminist international relations scholars and geographers, among others, who have analyzed the gendering of counterinsurgency doctrine. These scholars demonstrate how the gendering of COIN is central to a set of larger racialized and sexualized discourses and practices of war which ‘constitute men and women and masculinities and femininities’ in complex and sometimes contradictory ways (Khalili 2010, 473). Such constitutions, in turn, help to ‘produce particular narratives and justifications’ for COIN, including its portrayal as a ‘softer, gentler’ form of war (Dyvik 2014, 411). Analyzing the US military’s Female Engagement Teams, McBride and Wibben (2012) document the racialized ‘masculinist logic of protection’ which frames US soldiers as gentlemanly ‘soldier-warriors’ and Female Engagement Teams as benevolent (Young 2003). This chivalric benevolence is directly contrasted to the misogyny of the Taliban and Al Qaeda (see also Khalili 2010). Fluri (2011a, 2011b) expands these analyses to detail how gender informs the pursuit of what she names ‘corporeal security’ (Fluri 2011b, 284). Along with these and other scholars of COIN (e.g. Dillon and Reid 2009; Bell 2011; Basham 2013), I situate my analysis in the field of biopolitics. Biopolitics names that which ‘brought life into the realm of politics as an object of explicit calculations’, in which life is not simply understood as the single life of the individual, but the life of the population, of races and nations, or even life as a whole (Foucault 1986, 143).

Specifically, I argue three things. First, that a more nuanced take on the interplay of gender and war evident in Afghanistan is made possible by foregrounding the mutually constitutive role of gender and COIN in its three stages: clear, hold, and build. Notions of gender are not simply invoked and managed in COIN but are actively shaped and formed in and through its doctrine and practices. Second, this take illuminates how gender entangles with notions of visibility, mobility, and knowledge, the management of which were deemed central to COIN’s success.

<sup>1</sup>Colleen Bell writes that counterinsurgency first emerged in Afghanistan ‘as a response to the failure of counterterrorism strategy’ (2011, 310).

<sup>2</sup>Former President Obama made the 2006 US Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual, FM 3-24, the guide for US military operations in Afghanistan, notably the 2009 surge. The 2006 version is available online. In 2007, it was published with contributions by John Nagl and Sarah Sewall.

<sup>3</sup>I do not argue that COIN doctrine and the practice of war are perfectly matched. Rather, I suggest these paradigmatic moments capture their interplay and reveal a disposition of thought (Grant, 2002).

Although the ways in which gender is produced and mobilized is distinct in each of COIN's three stages, overall female bodies are held both to embody and access, as both custodians and conduits, the secrets indispensable to winning the war. As Khalili (2010, 13) notes, the female 'gendered body becomes a necessary, indeed, desired' resource in an 'asymmetrical war of conquest and occupation'. It becomes necessary in terms of the supposed 'softer, gentler' prosecution of war and, as I argue, precisely because such gendered bodies solve the tactical problems of tracking the mobility and marking the visibility of the insurgent which bedevils the prosecution of war. Thus, on the one hand, 'Afghan women's bodies act' as a 'metaphor for deliverance', while, on the other, they are also quite literally taken as deliverance from the strategic and tactical confusion of counterinsurgent war (Fluri 2009, 249). Put bluntly, they help to identify whom to kill and whom not to kill.

Third, by recognizing how women, and a particular constitution and management of female sex and sexuality, were held to be the secret to success in Afghanistan, we can identify COIN as a mechanism of the very construction of sex. This broadens and nuances Foucault's insight that sex (for he is referring only to sexuality) is not relegated to a 'shadow existence' but is spoken about 'ad infinitum, while exploiting it as the secret' (Foucault 1986, 35).<sup>4</sup> I argue that this valence of the secret – of women as concealing, revealing, being, and bearing the secret – is a distinct and still undertheorized element in both the analysis of the gendering of COIN and of its 'military orientalism' (Porter 2009; Barkawi and Stanski 2013). As Patricia Owens reminds (2010, 1043), 'military orientalism' is a 'cultural production ... made possible by other discourses, those of sexuality, gender and race'.

Scholars have shown how, in the case of Afghanistan and elsewhere, the veil functions as an overdetermined and 'multilayered signifier' in its own right whereby it is assumed that 'hiding the face is also disguising a secret ... creating a world of mystery, of the hidden' which must be revealed to establish imperial control (Fanon 1994, 43; Yegenoglu 1998, 47; Moallem 2005).<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, the veil symbolizes the 'tension between disclosure and concealment that defines the dominant conception of the secret'. But, as I show through my analysis, it is not simply in and through the trope of the 'veil' that Afghan women are constituted in relation to the secret. Overlooked in the fetishization of the veil as an object of analysis are the ways in which female sex (in its very materiality and management) is produced in multifarious relations to belief that Afghan women 'somehow hold the key to victory' (Porch 2013, 324).

As George Simmel powerfully outlined, secrets striate and govern political life and, 'as a staging ground for the deployment of power', become especially salient when conceptions of political order conflict (Scheppelle 1988, 5; Simmel 1950; see also Thomas 2016). The 'politics of the secret' (Birchall 2014, 26) and its concealment, or revelation, its possession and disclosure, animated, and justified COIN's turn to the household and to families. It was in the household that the secret to winning the war was believed to be located and fixed, materially and

<sup>4</sup>Osman's (2014, 877) critique of 'Afghan Women' applies to its invocation in COIN. He writes 'Afghan women have become Afghan Women, a singular passive entity that conforms to stereotypes of women under Islam ... a hollowed out or, indeed, empty signifier' (see also Fluri 2009, 2011).

<sup>5</sup>One of the portrayals of Afghan women (2011) is unapologetically titled 'Peace Unveiled', evoking the 1960s French film, the 'Falling Veil', both of which establish and recite unveiling as a metonym for secular modernity, women's rights, and liberties, and, significantly, for the triumph of the West and pacification of, respectively, the Afghan and Algerian nation.

characterologically embodied in women. Thus, I argue COIN mobilizes discourses of gender as the secret to the ultimate goal of counterinsurgency; namely, control of the territory and (through) control of the population.

Tracing the secret, the belief in it and the pursuit of it, as one justification for what Owens identifies as violent 'despotic household rule', puts my argument in dialogue with the turn in international relations to examine the role of the intimate and embodiment in war (Owens, 2015, 211, e.g. McSorley and Maltby 2013; Parashar, 2013; Dyvik and Greenwood, 2016).<sup>6</sup> Tracing the secret also illuminates the multiple effects of COIN's immanent and essential violence, and the ways in which discourses of the secret and of gender pattern and inform its expressions. As an explicit attempt at 'world making and world ordering', COIN depends on particular mobilizations of gender inherited from orientalist thought, in particular the conflation of the 'Orient' and of female sex as mysterious, dangerous, and hidden. Both are produced as seemingly unknown and unknowable and, yet, the possession of each is held as central to establishing control. My argument additionally serves as a reminder to contemporary assessments of COIN practices and successes that gender is not epiphenomenal or irrelevant but is fundamental to its logic, and to its logic of violence (Berman and Matanock 2015; Hazelton 2017; Mikulaschek and Shapiro 2018).

### The recurrence of the secret

In September 2014, in an 'atmosphere of anxiety' (Felbab-Brown 2014, 165) the situation of Afghan women returned to the fore. In part, this was prompted by the glaring absence of women in general and of Afghan women in particular in negotiations about the future of Afghanistan and how best to pursue peace. As Samira Hamidi, a member of Afghan Women's Network (AWN), cleverly conveyed in her sign 'Talk to Me, Not About Me' at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) meeting in Wales, the exclusion was pointed and demeaning. It also persists. Afghanistan's President Ghani stated in 2015 that he would 'not bother' women's right activists 'until the right time', and it is still unclear what roles women will have in renewed peace negotiations (Human Rights Watch 2015, 2016). Arguably, this continued exclusion is all the more pointed because it followed on years of public commentary cautioning against 'abandoning' Afghan women in the wake of the United States and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) drawdowns. Moreover, this public commentary and advocacy for Afghan women was itself rooted in the claim that 'the subjugation of women is a direct threat to the security of the United States' (Clinton 2010). Thus, a mere 4 years later and continuing to this day, not only are Afghan women ignored in their own right, but they are also ignored even if the meaning of their insecurity had previously been tied directly to the security of the United States.

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<sup>6</sup>COIN is one manifestation of the administration of the life processes on the level of individuals and populations, where sovereignty, disciplinary, and governmentality converge. Owens rightly defines COIN as violent expansive household management but argues that Foucault's biopolitics overlooks the continuation of household management due to his conflation of household with family. I agree with Barkawi that, in the end, Owens 'underlines rather than undermines biopolitics', and I suggest that tracing how secrecy functions as a mechanism of power clarifies the relations of household management and biopolitics (Barkawi 2016, 1).

Notably, 3 years before their exclusion from the NATO meeting in 2014, the nine women representatives on former President Karzai's High Peace Council (HPC), the entity tasked with peace negotiations asked to 'go ... to meet with Mullah Omar' who was at that time the leader of the Taliban and, thus, central to any peace talks.<sup>7</sup> But, as Ataullah Luddin, the council's deputy director stated, 'that's just not possible. If they go, they will be killed' (Sieff 2011). The vehemence of Luddin's warning makes sense in the context of Afghanistan, where women's defiance of their exclusion from political and public life always courts death.<sup>8</sup> But, the reason for their exclusion was rooted in a different concern: 'And anyway, we all know that women can't keep a secret for more than 34 hours' (Sieff 2011). Could this be what was just not possible and why? Not simply that the women would be killed if they meet with Mullah Omar, or that their deaths reveal the Peace Council as farce. Rather, the reason derives from the nature of women themselves. Women, 'we all know', possess a fault, an ontological defect, which bars them from political participation – in this case, the negotiations that sketch the future of Afghanistan and their position within it – and exposes them to death (Sieff 2011,10). Namely, women cannot keep a secret.

Sgt. Juanita Towns, a United States' Marine, does not disagree that women cannot keep a secret or else her mission to 'search local females and to do engagements with the women, to find out what was unusual in the area', would be of scant use (Keleher 2011). And, to those who may doubt the advantage of US forces engaging Afghan women, US Army Major Maria Vedder offers this rejoinder: 'In the time of Xerxes, it is documented that the king took advice from his queen ... We are still in Persia ... we must be able to access the females' (Vedder 2011). She is referring to Queen Esther, the virgin orphan chosen by King Xerxes to become his wife, who is said to have revealed her secret – that she was Jewish – to prevent the King from slaughtering her people, and to allow them to take revenge upon their enemies.

Unexpectedly, or not, the United States' counterinsurgency practices and philosophy are also premised on the putative incapacity of women to keep a secret. There is a consonant determination of women as conduits of, and repositories for, strategic information. I will say more about these examples but suffice it to say here that women are incarnated from the time of Xerxes (remaining atavistically so) as dangerous and deceptive in the secrets they keep, and as simultaneously deficient in defending those secrets from either Afghan or US forces.

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<sup>7</sup>In 2011, it was public knowledge that the HPC was a sham, with negotiations of any worth occurring through other means, and the nine women referred to as pawns openly and contemptuously. In 2014, the AWN produced a report on Afghan women's continued 'exclusion from important decision making and peace-building processes' (Karlidag 2014, 29). In an encouraging sign, women, including three from the HPC, held a meeting with representative from the Taliban in 2015, but little is known as to the details, aside from it was informal and held through a consultative process. Women's formal role in 2018 is still unclear.

<sup>8</sup>The number of individual Afghan women who act regardless of the costs to themselves and their families is notable, and organizations such as Revolutionary Association for Afghan Women, Afghan Women's Network and the Research Institute for Women's Peace & Security-Afghanistan have created and maintained a network and space for women to do so. Their presence and agency contradict the constitution of sex and sex difference in COIN, while the lack of engagement with, and recognition of, these organizations reveals the specific ideological commitment of COIN. See Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (<http://www.rawa.org/rawa.html>); Mehta 2002; Zoya 2002; Brodsky 2003; Hunt and Rygiel 2006; Rostami-Povey 2007; Fluri 2011; Heath and Zahedi 2011; Wahab 2012; Kitch 2014.

Obviously, the claim that women cannot keep a secret and that sex is the secret to which state power returns and from which it regenerates are not benign naturalizations of sociopolitical constructs. The claim doubly situates women in the crosshairs, as both subject to and objects of force, and insidiously as a 'force multiplier' for all sides for whom knowing the secret becomes the difference between winning or losing the war (Fassin and Pandolfi 2010, 335). Co-opted and conquered, targeted and tractable, women become simultaneously an end and a means of battle.

Thus, paying attention to the formulation of gender and the secret helps us to identify how the supposed possession of the secret does not confirm 'a position of 'exception' – whereby 'everything mysterious is also important and essential' – without a simultaneous confirmation of being made a target (Simmel 1950, 332).

## Clear

The three primary elements of COIN are security, governance, and development – all of which are understood synergistically as well as sequentially (clear, hold, and build). To best understand counter-insurgent doctrine is to focus on the paradoxes of counterinsurgency, for they 'turn conventional military thinking on its head' by prioritizing protecting the civilian and the population rather than lethal operations against insurgents (FM 3-24 2007, xvii). Of course, wielding deadly force is integral to COIN as is vividly obvious in the targeting of high level Taliban and Al Qaeda under the directive of 'kill and/or capture' commanded by Joint Special Operations Command. Night raids by Special Forces illustrated the intense effect of 'political strategies' ... '[taking] charge of life', with information gleaned through multiple 'cups of tea' then used to capture/kill creating a 'doctrinal synergy' between the two (Foucault 1986, 143, Niva 2013, 185).

COIN emphasizes armed, army and police, forces in a vertical relation of power (especially, surveillance). This vertical relation of power crosscuts that of the horizontal management of the population undertaken through development and humanitarian aid which, in turn, merges with military resources and goals. Collectively, this aid serves to publicize the beneficence of US presence and is intended to result in positive material and psychological effects measurable through a 'perception assessment matrix' of the population (FM 3-24 2007, 313; see also Khalili 2014). If this succeeds, then the local population can be persuaded to abandon insurgent forces. Foucault offers bio-politics as a concept capable of grasping this shift in modern techniques of power and political reason such that 'population emerged as an economic and political' problem demanding, and produced through, an 'ordered maximization of collective and individual forces' named as police (Foucault 1986, 25).<sup>9</sup> While for Foucault bio-politics captures the recursive relationships among population, police, and the state, and is deeply inflected by economic processes and reasoning, he explains that 'at the heart of this problem is sex' (Foucault 1986, 25).

By 'sex', Foucault means the occupation with and management of procreative sexuality in the privacy of the family, and in the service of the state, along with the incessant indexing and surveillance of non-procreative sexuality and pleasure as

<sup>9</sup>In the post-Cold War period, the Western development logic moved ... to a focus on persuading and protecting populations (i.e. 'human security' and 'biopolitics'). 'Winning Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan: Assessing the Effectiveness of Development Aid in COIN Operations', <https://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/wp1022-report.pdf>

abnormal. This effort ‘to constitute a sexuality that is economically useful and politically conservative’ requires that sex and sex difference is continually defined as oppositional, complementary, and heterosexual (Foucault 1986, 37). The contemporary counterinsurgent John Nagl, in his introduction to David Galula’s ‘Counterinsurgency Warfare’, adds another requirement; that it also be experienced: ‘The best writings on counterinsurgency share with the best sex manuals, the fact their authors generally have some personal experience of their subject matter’ (Galula 2006, vii). Or, as David Kilcullen (a contributor to the manual and former Senior counterinsurgency advisor for General Petraeus) first put it, ‘covet your enemy’s wife’ (Kilcullen 2010, 33).<sup>10</sup> And, in this, the USA counterinsurgency practices conform to colonial practices and philosophies of war. As the architects of the French counterinsurgency efforts in Algeria and elsewhere, Galula and Roger Trinquier were strategists for whom victory was denoted by the virgin, as opposed to ‘rotted’, state of the population, one undefiled by insurgency and penetrable by the French (Lazreg 2008, 29).<sup>11</sup>

The inheritance of these theorists, writing almost half a century earlier, is apparent in the repeated homage to Galula in FM 3-24 as the most ‘important’, ‘influential’, and ‘valuable’ of predecessors.<sup>12</sup> It is also traceable in the instructions delivered to soldiers in Afghanistan. Kilcullen writes, ‘win the women, and you own the family unit. Own the family, and you take a big step forward in mobilizing the population’ (2010, 40). Indeed, Kilcullen is echoing the instructions given by Galula to cleave Algerian women from the men by emancipating the women. It was not benevolence that led Galula to write, ‘Reflecting on who might be our potential allies in the population ... women, given their subjugated condition, would naturally be on our side if we emancipated them’ (Galula 2006, 105). The focus on the affective attachment is one hallmark of the colonialist inheritance of COIN, as a ‘managed heart’ is no less critical to the success of COIN than it was to ‘colonialism’s grammar’ (Stoler 2010, 40). This focus also highlights the persistence of discourses of gender which position (and naturalize) women as the source of persuasion and as easily persuaded which, in turn, legitimates bringing the war to the home (Bailliet 2007; Khalili 2010).

How, then, should the women be won? According to FM 3-24, the sequence of overturning support for the insurgency relies on coordinating the interests of women to match those of the counterinsurgents: ‘Women are hugely influential ... co-opting neutral or friendly women through targeted social and economic programs

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<sup>10</sup>This phrase was changed to ‘engage the women, beware the children’ in the 2007 version published by Chicago University Press. Roger Trinquier (1964), an officer in the French infantry who fought in the colonial wars in Indochina, Algeria, and the Congo, wrote *Modern Warfare*. David Galula, who also fought in Algeria, authored *Counterinsurgency Warfare* (1964). Both insisted on horizontal (hamlet, village, district) and vertical (sex, age, profession) organization of the individual and population. The first step is a detailed census of every household, whose variables are clearly displayed on the exterior of the dwelling, tagged by paternity as established in the records.

<sup>11</sup>Thomas Rid identifies the colonial heritage of such an admixture focusing on the French use of *razzias* in 19th century Algeria; Nasser Hussain observed, ‘Many of the measures that theorists and military brass have put their faith in were successfully enacted in colonial counterinsurgencies because they *already existed* in the arsenals of colonial administration’ (2009; see also MacDonald 2013). The counterinsurgency wars of Algeria and Afghanistan are not the same. Rather, the same theorists of Algeria directly influenced counterinsurgency doctrine – and it is to this history that the 2006 COIN directive and its proponents turned.

<sup>12</sup>See also Gventer *et al.* 2014.

builds networks of enlightened self-interest that eventually undermine insurgents' (FM 3-24 2007, 296). The tutorial approach, in which women are to be instructed in their own self-interest is profitably read through Alexis de Tocqueville's understanding of the concept of enlightened self-interest as it pertains to women. He believed that women's submission to conjugal (male) authority leads to domestic harmony, preserves a simple faith, and encourages procreation of virtue in the service of the commonwealth. Most importantly, it was what women themselves desired. As he wrote 'it appeared to me that ... (women) ... attach a sort of pride to the surrender of their own will and make it their boast to bend themselves to the yoke, not to shake it off' (de Tocqueville 2003, 260).

Indeed, the guiding premise of the manual is that women who do not support COIN lack enlightened self-interest, not that such enlightened self-interest may also motivate women to choose different actions or support different actors. In fact, the phrase 'enlightened self-interest' occurs only in reference to women. Women, it appears, are not only constitutively unable to keep a secret but are also unable to calculate in their own interests. Therefore, once targeted they will naturally reveal themselves and their secrets in a 'voluntary surrender' to the wishes of the counterinsurgents, affectively and actively binding themselves to those goals.

Importantly, before this can occur the women must be found. British Corporal Raziya Aslam explains: Afghan women 'get kept behind closed doors' and are 'hidden away' (Taneja 2011). In 2009, the United States Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned concluded that women 'live completely hidden lives inside their father's or their husband's compound' (Mehra 2010, 17) The description by the Marine's Lessons Learned may appear less overtly brutal than Franz Fanon's description of Galula's strategies. Fanon wrote: 'to destroy ... [Algeria's] ... capacity for resistance, we must first of all conquer the women, we must go and find them behind the veil where they hide themselves and, in the houses, where the men keep them out of sight' (Fanon 1994, 37–38). Nonetheless, the strategy and the goal which inform it are the same. Each establishes a positive relationship among co-optation, conquering, and counterinsurgency. This relationship is made possible only through violent invasion and identification, and relies on the projection and threat, if not the use of, direct force. Notably, in COIN such force is couched reassuringly as the coherence of enlightened self-interest of women with that of the always already enlightened counterinsurgents and is thus further justified as 'saving' Afghan women.

According to COIN, women are both materially and metaphorically a synecdoche for a population that must be managed, while the strategies of counterinsurgency refract and require the family conceived of as heterosexual. Indeed, biopolitics and counterinsurgency share the same focus in which the 'population is at once the central player and the main prize, at once the subject of politics and the objective of politics itself' (Campbell and Sitze 2013, 12). Consequently, the constitution and management of women is a charged and tense site of contestation. As I have sketched so far, the approach to women is striated with fear and desire, for to win the women means not only to own the family, but to also win the knowledge to protect and to pleasure oneself.<sup>13</sup> Intimacy and access circulate with the female body in the

<sup>13</sup>Secrecy involves a tension which, at the moment of revelation, finds its release. This constitutes the climax in the development of the secret; in it the whole charm of secrecy concentrates and rises to its highest pitch' (Simmel 1906, 465).



home as the locus of control – in Kilcullen’s words, the ‘physical piece of real estate’ (Kilcullen 2010, 9). Female sex and sexuality are at once familial and fetishized, with women both the source of and the secret to pacifying the insurgency. Women are thus fundamental to the governance of the population and are the ‘theme of political operations’ (Foucault 1986, 146).

Further, because women are presumed to be the source of as well as a synecdoche for the population and the nation, then not only are population and nation sexed as female, but the management of women is an explicit calculation of rule. In this, the editorial of the first *Al-Shamikh* magazine, sometimes referred to as the ‘jihad Cosmo’, corresponds: ‘Because women constitute half of the population – and one might even say that they are the population since they give birth to the next generation – the enemies of Islam are bent on preventing the Muslim woman from knowing the truth about her religion and her role, since they know all too well what would happen if women entered the field of jihad’ (Cavendish 2011). Thomas Ruttig, senior analyst at the Afghan Analysts Network, argued that the ‘Taliban movement is consciously redefining itself ... moving towards a more Islamic-nationalist ideal, concentrated on ridding Afghanistan of foreign presence’ (Ruttig 2011). If this is true, and as Afghan activist Simi Wali clarifies, ‘women have traditionally been used as instruments to regulate social behavior, and as such are powerful symbols in Afghan culture’, then the women themselves are both objects and subjects of control. In turn, the constitution of their identity is a consolidation of national identity and its purity (Rashid 2010, 111). Thus, to violate women is, in essence, to violate Afghanistan. ‘One pamphlet ... [produced by the insurgency] ... shows an American soldier touching a woman, accompanied by the caption: “Will you let that happen?”’ (Dorrnsoro 2011)?

This not an idle goad: it responded directly to the boasting embodied by US presence. Marine Corps Gen. James Mattis, now Secretary of Defense, jibed, ‘You go into Afghanistan, you got guys who slap women around for five years because they didn’t wear a veil. You know, guys like that ain’t got no manhood left anyway. So it’s a hell of a lot of fun to shoot them’.<sup>14</sup> His words recount an imperial orientalist script of emasculation and denigration, while also taunting the Taliban’s own mythic origins as the defenders of a particular hetero-normative social order, in which they were the defenders, and not the marauders (Khalili 2010). It is worth noting that the Taliban gained initial support from, especially, the rural population by defending against ‘monstrous’ atrocities, specifically rape, pedophilia, looting, and widespread civil conflict after Soviet withdrawal. Ahmed Rashid writes that the ‘rape of young boys by warlords was one of the key motives for Mullah Omar in mobilizing the Taliban’, who vowed to sustain order (Rashid 2010, 115; Barker 2011).<sup>15</sup>

Thus, discourses of gender articulate women in and through the nested relations of familial and national purity. Women are literally and figuratively property of men (and emblems of masculine honor) whose value derives from reproducing fathers and families, populations and potential. They are quite literally a resource for use and a source of contention no different from land or water: ‘Land disputes,

<sup>14</sup><http://www.cnn.com/2005/US/02/03/general.shoot/>

<sup>15</sup>The rape of boys, and the practice known as *bacha baazi*, is not uncommon in Afghanistan. But, that is not to be conflated with the acceptance of homosexual male relations among adults which were taken by the US military to confirm ‘the effeminate characteristics of male Pashtun interaction’ (Manchanda 2015).

water disputes, women disputes are a portion of the aftermath of three decades of war' (Za'if 2010; Mogelson 2011). This, of course, has been documented by feminist scholars of conflict who have grown familiar with the politically charged configuration of women/nation/resource and, correspondingly, with the way the configuration parallels and intersects with altercations over ownership/identity/use (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989; McClintock 1995). Indeed, insofar as women appear, they do so to mark a transaction that disappears them in their own right, as General Mattis' taunt made clear, subject to what Spivak calls a 'violent shuttling' among men and military forces (Spivak 1999, 216).

There is another effect of gender produced through this exchange, and hinted at in the question: What would happen if women entered the field of jihad? In counterinsurgency, it is sex and the differences of sex that are held to solve the 'counterinsurgent's hardest problem' – finding the combatant in the population (FM 3-24 2007, xxv; Kilcullen 2010, 60). Kilcullen rues that 'destroying him once found is easier by far than finding him in the first place' (2009, 60). This is because, in the words of one NATO general, 'the enemy is not obvious, nor easily identifiable, literally or figuratively, and may change on an almost-daily basis' (Kiszely 2008, 131).

How, then, to negotiate this indeterminacy and change? To find the combatant the distinction must first be made between combatant and civilian and, crucially, it must be made permanent and visible: 'counterinsurgents must be prepared to identify their opponents' (FM 3-24 2007, 35).<sup>16</sup> As Kinsella (2011) has shown in her history of the distinction, discourses of gender which naturalize sex and sex difference as oppositional, stable and permanent 'solve' the counterinsurgent's dilemma of identifying the combatant because such differences are presumed to be, or can be made to be, easily visible and unchangeable. Therefore, 'ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) support to counterterrorism and irregular warfare demands persistent, pervasive and timely surveillance' to be able to distinguish between combatant and civilian (Biltgen and Tomes 2010, 14).

Visual surveillance, along with material surveillance, is one form of the bipolar state, and is fundamental to the 'scopic regime' of counterinsurgency (Jay 2011, 114). So, too, is biometrics (retina scan, fingerprints, and photos, collected by the Hand-held Interagency Identity Detection System) touted as a means to identify insurgents and, simultaneously, build a voter ID registration database for Afghanistan. The combination of police and security forces with the administrative bureaucracy, 'the eyes and the arm of the government', comes to the fore in both collecting and managing such an undertaking (Galula 2006, 60). And, it is not the Afghan government that owns the biometrics, it is the government of the United States. Counterinsurgency may be understood as the explicit weaponization of an administrative apparatus that—especially in French colonial rule—was always already implicitly martial to begin.<sup>17</sup>

Significantly, however, women are hardly ever scanned, thus situating them both outside the insurgency (as civilian) and the state (as non-citizen). In a further twist, men who accompany women are less likely to be scanned, a practice used tactically by the insurgents. The reliance on sex and sex difference to make the combatant/civilian distinction and to marshal US military forces toward the proper

<sup>16</sup>This 'identification problem' is what Lyall and Wilson (2009) describe as an outcome of mechanized forces that are unable confidently or accurately distinguish combatant from non-combatant.

<sup>17</sup>I thank Adam Sitze for this phrasing.

targets is equally evident in the reversal of the presumption that wearing the burqa means one is both female and civilian, an assumption previously used against US forces in suicide bombings or to evade capture.<sup>18</sup> The recognition of such a need to confirm sex is at the same time an unacknowledged recognition of the presence of different, potentially unanswerable, questions. It is not only what will happen if women enter the field of jihad, but what happens if, as a consequence, sex and sex difference is simultaneously not visible and if it is not indicative of combatant and civilian distinction. The answer to these questions involves the discursive construction of sex – the secret women are said to keep and the secret women are said to find.

'Frisking burkha-clad women' in Afghanistan is as much a part of counter-insurgency as it was in Algeria, where searching women devolved to include instructions to French soldiers to 'touch the genitals' to confirm who were 'really women', and to conclude who were 'not men' (Lazreg 2008, 165). And, while the counterinsurgents have not forcibly unveiled the women in Afghanistan, the insistence on counting the number of veiled women as evidence of capitulation to US force repeats the French practice.<sup>19</sup> Unveiling is taken to establish and reveal the secret of sex and sex as the secret to security, conforming to a belief in the permanent 'perceptual verifiability' of sex (Butler 2004, 2). Just as Galula (2006, 166) proudly recounts the 'local ladies ... undressed ... French women ... above the waist to check if these French women really had breasts like them' so too do the US Female Engagement Teams relay the moment when they take off their helmets, unstrap some of their gear, as the moment of truth for both US and Afghan women. 'The higher ups had told the CSTs that they should be able to prove quickly and uncontroversibly that they were female ... [to encourage Afghan women] ... to speak more freely and share valuable information' (Tzemach Lemmon 2015, 42). Moreover, the circulated stories of US military women 'able to identify a man dressed in women's clothing, or a woman carrying a weapon, and alert their male team members', attest to the continued faith in sex as not only knowable, but as knowing and being able to 'tell' its own (Baldor 2016; see also McBride and Wibben 2012).<sup>20</sup>

These discourses of gender posit that physical sex functions as a marker of intent which allows for assessment of threat. However, it is not solely an exact correspondence for, as consistently highlighted, foreign women are referred to by Afghans as a kind of 'third gender' – neither men nor women. This indicates the mutability of the binary of sex (male/female) at the very point of its institution as a marker of intention, underscoring the continued uncertainty of reading the body as certain verification of the binary distinction of combatant or not. Like gender, the 'revelation of a secret is performative', and, as with all performatives, incurs its own

<sup>18</sup>One of the tactics that has changed over the years is that you now see men dressed up in burqas going through villages, something that we had not seen in years past', a US officer noted. Quoted in <http://www.afghanistannewscenter.com/news/2010/july/jul292010.html>

<sup>19</sup>The obsession with unveiling in Afghanistan, the ritualization and recitation of the veil, as is well documented, continues the fascination with and desire for control that repeats the substitution/substantiation of the female body for/with the nation. Unveiling 'calls upon ... women to take on the marks of white, Western femininity to become subjects' (Moallem 2005, 186; Fluri, 2009).

<sup>20</sup>Feldman describes telling as a 'proper reading of the various signs of embodiment', which takes place in the 'convergence of body space and topographic space', actively constructing the body itself (1991, 58).

failure (Manderson *et al.* 2015, 185). Additionally, even if it fails as a verification of threat, the presumption of such a discovery (when Afghan women are frisked, and military helmets removed) remains fundamentally imperial, producing and circumscribing an exchange that posits Afghan women as untutored and ignorant, unable to grasp women as US soldiers or to assess their strategic intent. Yet, the circulation of a concept of 'third gender' is one that Afghan women know, Afghan women fought against the Soviets and, as Azarbaijani-Moghaddam notes, 'were far more efficient at influencing the FETs than vice versa' (2012, 34).<sup>21</sup>

There is another consideration, however, that remains to be addressed. On the one hand, according to COIN to secure knowledge of sex (visual and tactile) enables one to secure knowledge of enmity, and to make targeting decisions. Yet, on the other hand, COIN holds that the truly 'decisive battle is for the people's mind' (FM 3-24 2007, 49). How then, how does one secure the mind? How do you tell? For US counterinsurgents, the answer recalls a colonial dream of omniscience and omnipotence founded in their faith in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. 'Trained to identify what could not be seen, and rewarded for amassing evidentiary knowledge, colonial agents produced their truths – measuring and making up differences that mattered (sexual, moral, medical, or otherwise) and that indexed the 'true' interior dispositions of those 'dangerous' subjects they marked' (Stoler and Bond 2006, 103).

## Hold

The emphasis on intelligence gathering and collection of information as the first 'faucet' for developing local strategies is an indication of the significance of mapping the population. 'In COIN, decisions at all levels must be based on a detailed understanding of the environment' (FM 3-24 2007, 135). Mullah Omar concurs. As one source commented, 'Mullah Omar said the first power in Afghanistan is information ... he who controls the information controls the will of the people' (Daragahi 2011). FM 3-24 observed, 'what makes intelligence analysis for COIN so distinct and so challenging is the amount of socio-cultural information that must be gathered and understood' (2007, 135). Indeed, some soldiers believed that there is no possibility of understanding: 'You're never going to fully understand these people ... you're fooling yourself' (Gentile, 2011). Thus, the 'cultural turn' in counterinsurgency was promoted as a means for gaining information, mapping the population, and tracing the 'atmospherics' of the conflict to best plan for military operations 'to remove all enemy forces and eliminate organized resistance in an assigned area' (FM 3-24 2007, 13).

The cultural turn has many critics, and for good reason, but it bears emphasis that in the pursuit of cultural knowledge and information, not only are women the objects of increased scrutiny, buttressed by the belief that 'women see and hear what goes on behind the walls', but they are also its operatives (Dennison 2011; Dyvik 2013, 199). As one female journalist commented, 'we could interview women who would never reveal their secrets to a man' (Barker 2011, 238). The use of counterinsurgent women was also Galula's particular project because he needed 'female help' to work on the women (Galula 2006, 165). According to Galula, the

<sup>21</sup>Raising Afghan girls as boys, called *bacha posh*, is a known practice. See Nordberg (2014) see also Heath and Zahedi (2011) for a discussion of Afghan women in the Soviet era.

presence of 'female social- welfare' cadres would not only be useful for seeking support from the women but would also function as a form of political propaganda. Similarly, the use of Afghan women was trumpeted by the CIA's Red cell. 'Afghan women could serve as ideal messengers in humanizing the ISAF role ... because of women's ability to speak personally and credibly about their experiences'.<sup>22</sup>

The participation of female Marines in Afghanistan (FETs) was touted as a channel to more and distinct information used, in part, to encourage the Afghan women to support an alternative to the Taliban. General McChrystal's officer explained, 'you can't swing the population to your side if you talk to only half of it' (Bumiller 2010). However, while FETs were to be restricted to non-lethal security assessment, the information gathered was integrated to better plan for kinetic and non-kinetic operations, forming a fundamental part of the 'kill chain'. As one FET explained, 'when you see a group of male Marines they're usually there for one purpose ... we go in there to soften up the relationship' (Dennison 2011).

What is this relationship? As Galula understood it, the purpose and the 'goal' was to 'impose firmly our will on the people so that they fully understand that might, order, and bread are on our side' (Galula 2006, 285). This goal remains. As one former FET underscored 'Our primary mission here is counterinsurgency, not empowering women'.<sup>23</sup> Access to information enables charting the conflict to protect US forces and to gain an advantage, because 'gathering intelligence on fast, fleeting, hidden and unpredictable adversaries requires knowledge of everyone, everywhere, all the time' (Biltgen and Tomes 2010, 14–16). Therefore, as one Marine advocated, 'you had to put a FET in there' because then 'the Afghan men spill their guts', presumably in the thrall of the universal 'natural desire men have to impress females'.<sup>24</sup> Women may, then, both ply their secrets and get the enemy's secret by acting on a putative feminine solidarity with Afghan women and by inciting putative heterosexual sexual desire in Afghan men, thus accessing the 'hidden depths' of home and hearts. Thus, as I have shown, discourses of gender in COIN work to produce Afghan women as both embodying the secret (to the distinction between the combatant and civilian) and, as FETS, able to access the secret (intelligence) while simultaneously being 'the best kept secret weapon' (Commanders Guide 2011).

Notice too, how at this juncture these discourses also locate Afghan women as figuratively and materially holding the center of conflict in the household, targeted as persuadable (to relinquish information and ally with the counterinsurgents) and as capable of persuading other members of the household to do likewise. But, that is not all. Women's position within the family and within the home is re-inscribed in both counterinsurgency doctrine and in practice, in part because it solves yet

<sup>22</sup>CIA Red Cell Special Memorandum; 11 March 2010, <http://wikileaks.org/file/cia-afghanistan.pdf>

<sup>23</sup>Princeton Alumni Weekly, 1 June 2011. E.B. Boyd, 'Women to Women: In Afghanistan Zoe Bedell led females Marines to a new Role'.

<sup>24</sup>Gina DiNicolò, 'Engendering Trust', 11March, <http://content.yudu.com/A1r03u/201103MAR/resources/105.htm>. 'Using this desire to interact with and impress females can be advantageous to U.S. military forces' Center for Army Lessons Learned, 2011: [http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/call/call\\_11-38\\_v1.pdf](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/call/call_11-38_v1.pdf); Thomas Ricks comments that FETS came about when the US military recognized that 'in an effort to respect local culture and tradition surrounding women, male American soldiers were being hoodwinked'. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/04/21/ashleys-war-a-look-at-the-use-of-combat-support-teams-in-afghanistan/>

another problem for the counterinsurgent. Roger Trinquier, after lamenting the loss of clarity and certainty of identifying an always mobile enemy notes that even ‘amidst the continuing movement of military actions’, the ‘stablest element’ is the denizens of the home (quoted in Kinsella 2011, 129).

The immobility of women is necessary for the prosecution and identification of the insurgents because it provides the boundary of the conflict, localizing the population and fixing the strategy. While women are both the objects and operatives of intelligence gathering, they also mark the edge of the insurgencies for, unlike, the fast, fleeting adversary, Afghan women are literally and figuratively immobilized due (formally) to requirements of *purdah* and of having a male chaperone. Therefore, the immobility of women also literally both clears and holds, through the home, camps, and forced relocations, the center of conflict, making whomever controls that center the stronger.<sup>25</sup> And, even their putative liberation from such restraints devolves to another site of paternal contestation and control between Afghan men and US military (see also Khattak 2002).

We can see this in two ways. One, the immobility of Afghan women is manifest in infrastructure programs. Respondents in a microfinance program in Afghanistan suggested that women’s lack of mobility makes them good investment. ‘If men go to the loan office ... they could escape from the village ... Women can’t escape from their houses’ (Zand 2010, 14; Nawa 2011, 110). But sex too has its own currencies: women repay their debt and are a payment of debt. Daughters are often used to settle opium debt, and the exchange of girl children results in their lack of education or employment, bonded into service for their husband’s household. As one Afghan man explained, ‘we don’t have the practice of letting our women go to school. When we marry them off, their owners will feed them’ (Eggerman and Panter-Brick 2010, 80; see also Kandiyoti 2007). In this regard, girls and women function as an instrument of credit and debt, and ownership of girls and women is a form of property and investment with value established on the basis of purity.

And, two, attempts to leave abusive marriages result in women and girls being arrested and imprisoned for ‘running away’ or for sex outside of marriage, although the former is not formally a crime under Afghan or customary law.<sup>26</sup> Known as *zina*, or as a moral crime, its prosecution brings to the fore what Foucault (1986, 26) described as the ‘sexual conduct of couples into a concerted economic and political behavior’. That is, marital status is linked to the economic and political status of women – as is vividly made clear in the banishment of over two million Afghan widows to beg, prostitute, and disappear. Indeed, the debate over the potential incorporation of Afghan women’s shelters under the Ministries of Women’s Affairs and of Justice is ongoing because having the shelters run by ‘foreigners’ challenges the surveillance of the Afghan police or the Afghan government. ‘These houses are not safe for Afghan women, according to Islam’, said one member of the influential committee of religious scholars of Kabul. ‘[A] ... safe house for a woman is the family home’ (Starkey 2011).<sup>27</sup> These statements suggest

<sup>25</sup>They become, as Khalili argues, a central ‘part of the landscape of war’ (2010, 8).

<sup>26</sup>In 2015, the Supreme Court ruled against imprisoning women ‘for running away from their families... but... the ban was limited to cases in which the women went to a medical provider, the police, or the house of a close male relative (Mahram)’.

<sup>27</sup>Another influential official argued, ‘Of course, if a shelter is working under control of foreigners ... then the women will be prostitutes’ (Starkey 2011).

how ownership and exchange of girls and women is also the secret to holding power in an otherwise mobile war where power is incessantly lost and regained. The ability to define the family entails the ability to regulate and control its opposite: the public and the political order it sustains.<sup>28</sup> For this reason, the contestation over women in the family home is fundamentally over possession and control, one in which both sides seek to triumph.

## Build

In this third stage of COIN, material intervention is organized with the goal of exposing the insurgents and turning the population to the counterinsurgents' advantage through the provision of health and welfare services. Aid is considered to be a primary means of out-governing and out-administering the enemy, replacing the services and benefits that the insurgency can provide. In other words, 'the information, security, and development component combine ... so that the population will, in the long run, support it rather than the insurgents'.<sup>29</sup> Here, women still function as a form of value and exchange between counterinsurgents and insurgents. For example, one of the arguments made for the provision of health care to women highlighted the example of a grateful Afghan woman who alerted US forces to an incipient ambush.<sup>30</sup> As a form of medical policing and as a 'carrot' for information, health care shapes women into benevolent operatives for the counterinsurgents.

We can make sense of these forms of humanitarian aid only in a context in which the military have simultaneously sized on women as a 'tactical idea', to quote French doctrine, re-inscribing Galula's fundamental command to split the women from the men. In Afghanistan aid functioned as a divisive intervention that singled out sex as a means of division, distribution, and regulation. Aid projects that did focus on women and girls, which were 'fast tracked' immediately after 2001 to provide for gender equality, produced a backlash among Afghans – including a sense that aid projects were anti-Afghan, anti-Islam, anti-men and gave preferential treatment to those who 'acted' or 'accepted' Western mores. As Lina Abirafeh notes, these aid interventions were prescriptive, not reflective of Afghan interests, and fundamentally geared towards establishing security as understood through counterinsurgency measures (Kandiyoti 2007; Benard *et al.*, 2008; Abirafeh 2009; Fluri 2011a, b).<sup>31</sup> After all, this aid is guaranteed solely to the extent that the populations co-operate.

This was made clear in 2010. In that year, US AID development initiatives directed specifically for women's rights were dropped. One official at US AID excused this move, saying, 'Nobody wants to abandon the women of Afghanistan ...[but] ...the grim reality is that ... things are going to have to give' (Chandrasekaran 2011). Justification for the jettisoning of these programs,

<sup>28</sup>I thank Nancy Luxon for this phrasing.

<sup>29</sup>The Counterinsurgency Guide of 2009, *U.S. Interagency Counterinsurgency Initiative*, 13 January.

<sup>30</sup>Quoted in Benard *et al.* (2008), Again, the presumption that women's self-interest, properly understood, must align with US interest trumps all other strategic explanations such that women can only be described as 'grateful'.

<sup>31</sup>Success is measured by how quickly aid suggests (if not truly represents) some vision of reworked social and political order, identified through participation in a recognizable public economy, regardless of substantive change.

described as ‘pet rocks’, was couched in terms of ‘feasibility concerns’ and ‘overreaching in terms of what would be realistic’ (Chandrasekaran 2011). Consequently, attention to women would be set aside and programs should be revised to provide ‘basic services’ (FM 3-24 2007, 133). It is, at first glance, a straightforward cost-benefit analysis; as one senior official in the Obama administration lamented, ‘These guys don’t get it ... ten years on we still have to make the case that women are additive’ (Lemmon 2011).

Yet, we should question this claim and the calculus it entails. This equation not only instrumentally values women, but it also institutes a sexed economy that places welfare (basic services, feasibility concerns) and warfare in the service of the management of a population that must be pacified. ‘Women’ become a fungible resource of risk and profit, a part of an equation that, in the end, is fundamentally bio-political and not, as is suggested, merely mathematical.<sup>32</sup> In invoking what is realistic, such an exchange hones a ‘dense transfer point’ of the disciplining and micro-management of the individual body and the macro-management of the population (Foucault 1986, 103). It also calls forth a highly particular meaning in counterinsurgency doctrine, in which basic services and feasibility concerns are no more neutral than describing women’s rights and liberties as pet rocks. Rather, basic services are those deemed crucial to ‘control the population’ (FM 3-24 2007). The focus on basic services equally invokes a particular neoliberal economy and model of economics crucial to what Eqbal Ahmad (2006, 57) described as a ‘liberal reformist’ way of war. In this way of war, reform of economic system is advocated insofar as it neutralizes potential grievances and swings the population away from insurgents.

Moreover, Nancy Fraser’s observation (2013, 240) that ‘the dream of women’s emancipation is harnessed to the engine of capitalist accumulation’ is a harsh reality in Afghanistan where neoliberal patrimony shuffles women into small loan, micro professions with potential for service provisions, directing material resources toward a future capitalist market that has yet to appear.<sup>33</sup> The reasoning is made clear by the head of Goldman Sachs Foundation. She argued that the global gross domestic product is improved when there is an increase in ‘the number of small and medium-sized enterprises owned by women ... It’s particularly relevant though in ... Afghanistan, because ... when women make additional revenues, they invest 90 percent of them back into the education and health’ (Rold 2014).<sup>34</sup> Consequently, when efforts which specifically supported women’s rights were dropped, those which emphasized health, education, and participation in the workforce were not as they give ‘a higher rate of return’.<sup>35</sup>

Note, however, in COIN, education and health matters not solely for improving individual and collective lives, *per se*, but because it affects reproduction. As women’s education and employment increase, the number of children decreases. This is not solely a question of female agency and health but is explicitly

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<sup>32</sup>Women are a ‘central component’ against and a fundamental antidote to the ‘cancerous tissues’ of the insurgency (FM 3-24 2007). Economic development falls under the third stage of triage: ‘Outpatient care—movement to self-sufficiency’.

<sup>33</sup>As Galua maintained all local insurgencies are ‘part of a global war against capitalism’, and ‘a victory locally strikes a blow globally’ (2006, 33).

<sup>34</sup>[http://www.bushcenter.com/downloads/theInstitute/womensInitiative/AWC/Follow\\_up-AWC.PDF](http://www.bushcenter.com/downloads/theInstitute/womensInitiative/AWC/Follow_up-AWC.PDF)

<sup>35</sup>Lawrence Summers, quoted in [http://prospect.org/cs/articles?article=hillarys\\_challenge](http://prospect.org/cs/articles?article=hillarys_challenge)



understood as a tactic against the ‘threat’ of poverty. In other words, while reduced maternal mortality is, without doubt, a benefit for women and their families, it also ties directly with theories of insurgencies that tag ‘angry young men’ or the ‘youth bulge’ as the direct source of insurgencies. Unlike Galula, who believed that targeting the children should not be part of the strategies, contemporary counter-insurgents see the children as the future of the war, and women’s influence as central to its direction: As quoted in a 2011 ISAF guidance note, ‘The future of Afghanistan rests with the children. If we don’t engage, then the enemy will so they need to be considered in our human terrain-targeting construct’.<sup>36</sup> Women are both tools and objects of development, with both their productive and reproductive value measured according to counterinsurgency and pacification needs.

In this sense, too, we may identify a counterinsurgent war that is explicitly never-ending for it presumes that the threat will always be nascent, both literally and figuratively reproduced unless the women can be controlled and directed, and reproductive sex managed. This, as Foucault originally taught us, transforms birth and death explicitly from the private purview of the family to a state concern – not simply because of labor, both productive and reproductive, but also because reproduction is highlighted as the central source of the ‘care, control, and use of life’ (Agamben 1988, 121–22). Accordingly, ‘liberal power triangulates security, populations, and territory in a way that binds geostrategic concerns to the active production of ways of life’ in which women hold the secret to pacification (Evans 2011, 751).

## Conclusion

As histories of counterinsurgency delineate, its strategies and methods travel. What we learn about the construction of gender in Afghanistan, put in conversation with past practices, provides insight into how ‘certain practices are innovated—or consolidated and improved if imported—and then used as models for practice elsewhere’ (Khalili 2010, 416). Sarah Sewall claims that while the field manual may ‘draw upon colonial teachings and US Marines code of conduct for occupying Latin American nations’, its conduct and standards have evolved (FM 3-24 2007, xxxiv). Yet, as I and others have argued, COIN reflects the contradictory liberal politics and colonial concepts that set it into motion and remains in the service of imperial power and technologies of violence (e.g. Barkawi 2010; Khalili 2014; Owens 2015).

Specifically, I argued that the belief that COIN can be recuperated from its colonial history to facilitate a progressive agenda of women’s rights and liberties in particular exposes a fundamental misunderstanding of COIN’s ideology and implementation. COIN in Afghanistan focuses on gender and sex not in terms of rights and identity, but in terms of biopolitics, with biopolitics emerging in the nexus between territory and population. Sex and gender are inscribed as the fulcrum in each of the phases of COIN: clear (separate men from women and children); hold (persuade households, centering on women, to invest in the counterinsurgents through information and access); build (make women participate in an economy, whether licit or illicit, that excludes insurgents, manage

<sup>36</sup>This is repeated in the 2015 US Military’s Contribution to the National Security Strategy where ‘surplus’ populations are identified as a threat. [http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Publications/2015\\_National\\_Military\\_Strategy.pdf](http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Publications/2015_National_Military_Strategy.pdf)

reproduction, and raise peaceful children). At each stage women, as bearers of both sex and of the secret, are supposed to solve the problems of visibility, mobility, and knowledge which confront the counterinsurgents. From 'telling' the difference between combatant and civilian, to embodying, and thus solving, the difference between combatant and civilian, to gaining information about and entry to 'hidden' spaces, to marking the limit of the insurgency through their emplacement in the heterosexual household, women emerge as both the key to control and targets of control. This is because discourses of gender which produce women as the secret to, and as bearing the secrets of, success gird the identification, selection and calculation of whom to kill and whom to let live, organizing 'a political ordering of life' at every stage of clear, hold, and build (Foucault 1986, 123; Khalili 2010).<sup>37</sup> Tracing the notion of the secret also helps us to see that COIN demands a specific sexed brutality as it did in the past, precisely because sex is central to the control of populations. One might argue that the Taliban, by contrast, understood this and not despite, but because of, their ruthlessness, they succeeded in clear, hold, and build under their rule.

Accordingly, as polyvalent discourses of gender and of secrecy coalesce in the logic of COIN, women are situated in dangerous and precarious ways. The belief or the possession of the secret is not benign, nor are those believed to hold them in unmitigated positions of power. As Simmel reminds, secrets and their bearers are 'surrounded by the possibility and temptation of betrayal' (Simmel 1950, 334). While what Derrida (1994, 245) terms the 'secrecy effect' – namely, the supposition that there is a secret – exposes women to explicit and insidious forms of violence in the effort to find, uncover, and seize the secret. This fixes women in a constant state of surveillance, subject to continual contest for control. In turn, this contest undermines autonomy and makes more difficult a space of agency and resistance – all of which are necessary to any form of democratic politics and emancipatory practices (Thomas, 2016). In COIN, the household and the women in it take form as terrain and tactics of war (see Owens 2015, 284–86). Consequently, my argument further illuminates how the emphasis on the 'rights and liberties' of Afghan women as (political) subjects obfuscates the fundamentally coercive focus on Afghan women as (biopolitical) objects of control. Attention to the secret and the manner in which it intertwines with the intimate, the household, and gender also contributes further evidence of war as 'world making and world ordering' central to critical war studies (Barkawi 2016).

Ironically, considering the number of contemporary assessments of COIN's success or failure, to ignore the critical role of the 'secret' is also to obscure the ways in which COIN is itself riven with internal contradictions that set it up for failure (Berman and Matanock 2015; Hazelton 2017). On the one hand, women are external to counter/insurgency, understood as secretive, immobile, easily influenced, and absent self-interest; and, yet, on the other hand, women are central to counter/insurgency, understood as influential, incapable of keeping a secret, and self-interested. Women are then positioned as the central means of COIN and, simultaneously, the exemplar of the noncombatant itself. Thus, the contradictions

<sup>37</sup>In Algeria, 'military strategists... found in the ideology of "women's emancipation" a weapon of choice and an opportunity to open a new psychological and political front that expanded their 'pacification' doctrine (...) In its fundamentals, the military gender strategy sought to use women as its Trojan horse to do its bidding in the intimacy of the family' (Lazreg 2008, 145).

in the meaning of sex and sex difference introduces logical impasse into the categories of clear, hold, and build, undermining them from within. The only commonality in these contradictions is that they converge on what women are said to lack: resistance, agency, and cunning. These are characteristics that almost any woman in Afghanistan could testify have been absolutely central to their survival in thirty years of war. Perhaps this secret, hidden in plain sight, is the only secret to understanding the failure of COIN, and the secret which women may keep.

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