



***Counterinsurgency: What the United States Learned in Vietnam,  
Chose to Forget and Needs to Know Today***

**By David Donovan**

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Reviewed by LTC (Retired) Rick Baillergeon

As a young company grade officer in the mid-1980s, I vividly remember reading David Donovan's *Once a Warrior King*. In it, Donovan discusses the time he spent as a military advisor in South Vietnam's Mekong Delta. It was a book that articulated the human dimension of war as well as any I had read. Without question, this volume had a huge impact on me and many of my peers who had read it early in their military careers.

Since the publication of his book, Donovan (pen name for Terry Turner) has kept a very quiet profile in military history literary circles. For many years (decades), I had hoped and looked for another book by Donovan. However, as I later found out; he had focused his attention in academia and science. Much to my surprise, I recently discovered he had just published *Counterinsurgency: What the United States Learned in Vietnam, Chose to Forget and Needs to Know Today*. Needless to say, my anticipation and expectations were extremely high.

Within *Counterinsurgency*, Donovan has taken his Vietnam War experience and combined it with decades of reflection. The result is a book that concisely addresses counterinsurgency (COIN) operations in the past, present, and future. Within the past, he keys on the practices and lessons learned of the Vietnam War. The present obviously addresses operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Finally, in regards to the future, Donovan offers expert advice and vision on an area that is clearly not going away in the near or far term.

To address this continuum, Donovan is aided by the book's simple yet highly efficient organization. He divided the volume into nine chapters, each focusing on a specific aspect of COIN. These chapters range the gamut from questions a country should ask itself before considering COIN operations to recommendations for the advisors on the ground. In total, Donovan provides readers with an incredible amount of information and advice in roughly 200 pages.

Donovan's writing skills have clearly not eroded in the past three decades. He has taken a topic many authors tend to overcomplicate and made it understandable for readers. As he displayed throughout *Once A Warrior King*, Donovan is extremely gifted in gaining and then maintaining a reader's attention. These attributes combined with the conciseness of the volume make this a very quick read. I believe there are two things that differentiate Donovan's effort from the preponderance of books written on COIN.

First, I have found that many of the more popular books tied to COIN are more academically written and focused. There is clearly a need and an audience for these books. Donovan, on the other hand, has strived to craft a book that does not possess the academic overtones to it. Because of this, readers will find it easy to comprehend and should have little difficulty grasping Donovan's excellent teaching points.

Second, most COIN books published are either focused at the strategic level or with the boots on the ground. Donovan has attempted to address both. As he states in his introduction, "The discussions in this book are intended for those who think about counterinsurgency from a policy perspective as well as to those who do counterinsurgency in the field." Donovan is able to treat both areas effectively as well as those in-between areas which make COIN operations so challenging.

Within *Counterinsurgency*, Donovan makes excellent use of the insight of other former Vietnam War advisors. To achieve this, he has inserted dozens of their vignettes throughout the book. Each is filled with critical lessons learned. Donovan addresses their value and the apparent underappreciation by others when he states, "Those experiences are as relevant today as when they were freshly learned. Sadly, they have been available for decades, a repository of experience and knowledge apparently overlooked and certainly uncalled upon."

Donovan has crafted another incredible book. *Counterinsurgency* is superbly written, impeccably organized, and will unquestionably benefit everyone who reads it. It clearly exceeded the high expectations I had for it. I will now anxiously look forward to his next book. Let's hope it is not another 30 years between volumes!