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Renowned Counterinsurgency Expert and Architect of the Surge on Campus

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Renowned Counterinsurgency Expert and ‘Architect of the Surge’ Lectures on Campus

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Article By: MC1 Leonardo Carrillo

The Naval Postgraduate School hosted Dr. David Kilcullen, Senior Counterinsurgency Adviser to General David Petraeus in Iraq, for a Secretary of the Navy Guest Lecture (SGL) to students, faculty and staff, Aug. 16 in King Auditorium. Kilcullen, a prominent author and founding President/CEO of Caerus Associates, played a significant role in planning and executing the 2007 troop surge that was a key turning point for the coalition forces in Iraq.

The SGL, titled “Counterinsurgency in Global Context,” gave the audience an opportunity to listen to, and ask questions of, the renowned theorist. Kilcullen gave first-hand insights into the topic of counterinsurgency – ranging from its historical background to its current state – and offered ideas for solving the challenges of the ever-evolving form of warfare.

From a historical perspective, Kilcullen pointed out that insurgencies have been a part of war since ancient times. He said that the evolution of states has been shaped by their ability to control internal populations while at the same time dealing with external threats. This role of insurgency and counterinsurgency, said Kilcullen, has probably been more recurrent than what is known as ‘regular’ warfare.

“The majority of conflicts on the planet,” he said, “are, and probably always have been, between states and non state actors.”



Dr. David Kilcullen, noted architect of the surge in Iraq in 2007, speaks to NPS students, faculty and staff, Aug. 16 in King Auditorium. (U.S. Navy photo by MC1 Leonardo Carrillo)

Kilcullen continued, “The exercise of a counterinsurgency function is not only endemic to human society as we know it ... it probably actually is the defining feature of government.”

In spite of the historical presence that counterinsurgency has held, said Kilcullen, the term used today was born as a result of the Cold War when U.S. and Soviet strategists realized that, to avoid an all-out nuclear war and still defeat their rivals, they would have to engage in a series of proxy wars that would involve non-state actors, insurgencies, and counterinsurgency tactics.

This gave way to the birth of many schools of thought that were revived during the incursions in Iraq and Afghanistan, Kilcullen said, but strategists and soldiers on the ground found that Cold War tactics didn’t always work in the 21st century.

Kilcullen noted that many theorist and experts debated on what exactly makes a counterinsurgency but that in practice, governments and militaries should be adaptive to what the realities are on the ground rather than sticking with a more dogmatic approach.

He noted that in Iraq they reconciled with local leaders that were initially opposed to, and even fighting, coalition forces. Kilcullen said that a government has to be built by its own people, from within; otherwise it’s legitimacy will breakdown and fail.

As an example, Kilcullen told a story of an Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) chief that was killed with an IED by a local man that wasn’t an insurgent but had turned to the Taliban because it was his only option after the chief had threatened with implicating him with the Taliban and turning him in to the coalition forces if he didn’t give him his daughter in marriage.

Many times people see violence and assume that it is generated by the insurgents, said Kilcullen, but it is important to consider weather the people they are working with are not the ones undermining their efforts.

Kilcullen also spoke of important strategic changes that need to be addressed in the structure of deployments and formations of forces on the ground and the impact these changes could have on counterinsurgencies. He answered questions from the students in the audience and engaged in discussions with them on their experiences in the field both in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In his current role with Caerus Associates, Kilcullen works with communities to apply population-focused design in order to enable sustainable change in conflict-affected environments.

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