Our Lives Marked By War: 
Reflections on J. Glenn Gray’s The Warriors

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I am going to talk to you tonight a little bit about this book, The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle.¹ It was written by a philosophy professor who studied Martin Heidegger, and I’m guessing none of you have studied Heidegger yet. There are philosophy professors in the room, so I won’t get in trouble by telling you to continue in that tradition. Heidegger is tough going. What I’m going to try do for you tonight is put in context some of what J. Glenn Gray talked about in ways that will make sense to you and connect with your life a little bit. And I’m going to do a lot of that by telling some of my stories.

First, let’s talk about this very interesting man, Jesse Glenn Gray. It’s the centenary of his birth. He is no longer here, but he was an interesting guy. He graduated from this fine institution you have just become a part of and he did pretty well, magna cum laude, which means “with great honors.” That is pretty good. I am sure all of you — because you came to watch this on a Sunday night — don’t have much by way of a social life, so you, too, are likely to be magna cum laude. That’s a good thing.

Gray collected graduate degrees. He went to the University of Pittsburgh, earned a master’s degree in philosophy, and then went to Columbia University and took his Ph.D. in philosophy there. In a great story that starts off the book, the same day he received his notice that he had received the Ph.D., he also got notice that he had been drafted into the United States Army. So that was a good news/bad news kind of day. The army was not exactly what he was planning to do with his doctorate in philosophy. He went and served in Europe in Germany, France, and Italy and saw some pretty tough fighting. If he were here with us, I am confident he would say his war experience was the most important thing that happened in his life.

The experience of going to war marks almost everyone who experiences it. I feel that we, as Americans, have less of a sense of how important war is because our country has been pretty blessedly free of wars being fought over our territory. I married a woman I met at Oxford whose parents fled Hungary in 1956 when the Soviet tanks arrived. For them, for Europeans, for people in most of the rest of
the world, honestly, war is a much more present event than it is for most Americans. So we are fortunate not to fully understand the horrors of war in a way that lots of other people do.

Following the war, J. Glenn Gray wrote a bunch of books on philosophy, including this book, The Warriors, probably his most famous book. But he continued to think about violence and war for his whole life and died in Colorado Springs long before any of you were born.

I want to commend Juniata College for choosing such a challenging book for its freshman reading book. This is a tough book, and I’m going to see if I can help a little bit. The thesis of the book — if I could boil down the book to a single quote from Gray— would be this one:

But the soldier who has yielded himself to the fortunes of war, has sought to kill and to escape being killed, or who has even lived long enough in the disordered landscape of battle, is no longer what he was. He becomes in some sense a fighter, whether he wills it or not — at least most men do. His moods and disposition are affected by the presence of others and the encompassing environment of threat and fear.²

That’s a great phrase, “the encompassing environment of threat and fear.” You never know when you’re at risk and that changes everything, and it’s really hard to come back from it.

Do I have any war veterans in the room? You are never the same when you come back. And one of the things I’m going to talk about a lot is the Iraq and Afghanistan experience and what I see as a lifetime obligation of Americans to take care of those who served in those wars. When J. Glenn Gray fought in World War II, very few women were allowed in uniform and not really in fighting roles. That has changed almost completely. We could not have fought the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan without women in uniform and I have personally served with enormously brave women in uniform. So I’m going to apologize retroactively for J. Glenn Gray’s attitude here. He uses the male pronoun, and I will do the same: “He must surrender in a measure to the will of others and to superior force. In a real sense he becomes a fighting man, a Homo furens.”³ And so this book is really about what happens to people who serve in combat. That’s what J. Glenn Gray talks about. What I am going to do is run through the book riffing on his chapter titles and talk some about what he says and compare and contrast it with what I have seen and experienced.

REMEMBERING WAR AND FORGETFULNESS

Gray talks a little bit about preparing to be a warrior. It wasn’t clear to me that I was doing that. I went to West Point in 1984 — long before any of you were born— about a decade after the Vietnam War. I enjoyed West Point. Few really believed the United States and the Soviet Union would come to blows. An army commitment seemed like a really safe thing to do. In fact, it’s not clear to me if, when I was
your age and I volunteered to go to West Point, I really understood that I had go into the army afterward. I
did figure that out along the way. I was a little surprised.

![Image](image.jpg)

Figure 1. The author at his West Point graduation in 1988. Photograph courtesy of the author.

Traditionally, historically, old warriors have taught young warriors what war is and what to do in combat and what that’s like. Two intellectual guides in particular shaped me as a warrior. Dan Kaufman fought in Vietnam, got a Ph.D. from MIT, became a dean at West Point, and is my son’s godfather. The other is Bob O’Neill, an Australian who taught me at Oxford. I just saw Bob in Australia last week at a conference commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the departure of American and Australian combat troops from Vietnam. They both experienced war and they both taught me about it before I experienced it myself.

![Diagram](diagram.png)

**SPECTRUM of CONFLICT**

Stable Peace--------Unstable Peace--------Insurgency-----------------------------Conventional War

Figure 2: The spectrum of conflict.
One of the things they taught me was something called the spectrum of conflict. And this is the idea that war and peace are not an either/or. It’s not a light switch. Rather, war and peace are on a continuum. You can go from a stable kind of peace, sadly lacking in much of the world, particularly the Middle East, to an unstable peace. Then there is insurgency, the kind of war we are seeing in Syria right now, with Syrian rebels who unfortunately may be affiliated with Al Qaeda fighting against the Assad regime—a regime that is currently using chemical weapons in a large way against its own people. But insurgencies, “small wars” can go all the way up to general war. “Big war,” conventional war, tanks against tanks, like the kind of war that J. Glenn Gray talks about in this book, is the far end of the spectrum of conflict. I’m going to come back to this idea of the spectrum of combat later.

I did two tours at Oxford. I got my master’s degree at Oxford and went away and fought in Desert Storm. I then went back to Oxford to get my Ph.D. While I fought in one of the few conventional force-on-force, tank-on-tank kind of wars we have had in the last fifty years, I was not interested in tank-on-tank war. I was interested in insurgencies and terrorism.

One of the influential books on insurgency is T.E. Lawrence’s *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. Lawrence, who was “of Arabia,” led a band of Arab guerrilla fighters against a conventional Turkish army in the First World War, and in reading it you actually feel sorry for the guys he was fighting against. They just didn’t know how to fight guerrillas. It should sound familiar. At one point Lawrence wrote, “War upon rebellion was messy and slow, like eating soup with a knife.” I read that in the bathtub, having just come back from a run in Oxford. I was in the bathtub, drinking Champagne, eating strawberries. (It’s Oxford; that’s what you do there, right?) I read that phrase and I said, “Eureka! I have found it.” I had the title of my dissertation. That dissertation became the basis of my first book—now read by dozens of people worldwide—*Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*.

I mentioned that there have been few of the kind of wars that J. Glenn Gray writes about since his war. The big wars or conventional wars that America has been involved in since then are World War II, the Korean Conflict, and Desert Storm. There have been a whole bunch more irregular wars: Vietnam, of course, and the war against Al Qaeda, which started with Al Qaeda’s war against us, the first bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993. That was a car bomb attack that almost succeeded; in fact, it came disturbingly close and should have given us a better idea of what was going to come in 2001. Other unconventional conflicts include the war in Iraq, which started as a conventional fight and very quickly became an insurgency. An additional example in this very difficult pattern of insurgency is America’s longest war, the war in Afghanistan, which began all the way back in 2001 when we toppled the Taliban regime and continues today.

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From recalling these conflicts, we realize that America has been at war for essentially your whole sentient lives. Since you were five or six years old on September 11th, America has been at war. My belief is that the U.S. experience has marked you in some ways not unlike J. Glenn Gray’s experience marked him. I’m going to show something that can be a little tough.

Figure 3: The author in Desert Storm. Photograph courtesy of the author.

That’s me in Desert Storm, who you can’t see too closely, which is good. Never grow a mustache. And at your age, very few of you can pull it off. I can’t now and couldn’t then. It’s not a good look for me.

J. Glenn Gray’s war started with a surprise attack on the United States at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii when over 2,000 Americans were killed. Over the next four years, the United States and our allies around the globe fought the biggest war in the history of man, and that war came to an end in four years. The war that you have all been a part of, at least emotionally, started twelve years ago and killed almost 3,000 Americans in a surprise attack, and that war continues and is likely to continue for some years to come. And so, as I thought about you and tried to relate this book to you, it struck me that that experience was one that perhaps we needed to talk about, to think about. I will try to help you make sense of this book and maybe help you make sense of the life you are leading and the life you are going to continue to lead—a life in which there are people who fly airplanes into buildings.
THE ENDURING APPEALS OF BATTLE

The 9/11 attacks conjure images that make for a tough transition into the next chapter of J. Glenn’s book, in which he writes about the enduring appeals of battle. I’ll focus on Robert E. Lee’s words to General James Longstreet at the Battle of Fredericksburg. Lee said, “It is well that war is so terrible, otherwise we should grow too fond of it.” That’s about a different kind of war. There is something appealing about Civil War battles and even Desert Storm with tanks charging into the desert. That is not the kind of war that we have been fighting for the last decade. There is nothing glorious, nothing appealing in our modern wars. J. Glenn Gray said, “War can be . . . most excruciatingly boring,” but it also can be the exact opposite of that. It can be the most exciting thing that there ever was. And it’s painful and glorious, and this goes again to the extraordinary power of the wartime experience, of those who experience it, both men and women.

LOVE: WAR’S ALLY AND FOE

There is love in war and love can be at its strongest, most powerful in war. Gray discusses three different kinds of love: romantic love; the love of all that is good that men and women make in this world; and one of the greatest joys of life, the value of friendship.

And I would love to be able to tell you that I experienced romantic love in either of my wars, but not so much. I did feel a strong sense of desire to preserve that which was being destroyed by war. I don’t know how many of you have seen the film Brideshead Revisited, or read Evelyn Waugh’s wonderful book about the same war J. Glenn Gray talks about, the Second World War. Waugh sets his story in a wonderful old house that is all but destroyed by the Second World War. And the book is about the tension between his love of and his desire to preserve this beautiful house and the damage that is being done to it by war. That nicely illustrates Gray’s second form of love in war.

Gray’s third kind of love is that of friendship. Gray wrote, “When a person finds a friend to whom he can open his heart, when a woman finds a man she can love and to whom she can bear children, when any of us find a community we can love and serve, our little lives take on a significance we had not dreamed of.” I can hardly stress more than he did the importance of finding a friend, when you find a community to love and serve. I would hope that all of you have found that community here at Juniata. When you do that, your life takes on a significance you would not have previously believed it could have.

I can talk to you a good deal about friendship in war. That concept brings to my mind Pete Johnson, my tank platoon leader and buddy next to me in Operation Desert Storm. It also calls to memory friends I served with in my second war in Iraq. That is General David Petraeus (Figure 5) with a bunch of people who worked with him and tried to help him change the way we were fighting the war in Iraq.
Friends all. In some ways, friendships are never stronger than when they are under such risk, and life is never sweeter than when you realize it may be ending very quickly.

Figure 4: The author with friends during Desert Storm. Photograph courtesy of the author.

Figure 5: The author with General David Petraeus. Photograph courtesy of the author.

THE SOLDIER’S RELATIONS TO DEATH

Some of you may have lost people and as a result understand how much more precious life gets when you realize what a finite thing it is. As a school headmaster, this is where I say, “carpe diem,” seize the day. None of us know how many days we have. Make the most of your days. And most of all, build friendships that will sustain you through the hard times.

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Death obviously is an important part of war. I’m conscious of the legacy of death and the history of the lands in which we fight. I’m standing in Iraq (Figure 6), a country in which I fought two wars myself, and I’m standing next to the tombstone of a British soldier who died in Iraq in the 1930s, because Iraq was a British possession. It can’t be lost on us that it is a country that has been fought over for the last 100 years.

There is a memorial at Fort Riley in Kansas to the twenty-two soldiers we lost in my task force in al Anbar, Iraq, 2003-2004. Each of the soldiers lost is represented by a rifle, and each one has that soldier’s name on it. And here (Figure 7), I meet the artist at our own Arlington National Cemetery,
visiting one of those soldiers killed in an improvised explosive device attack on October 31, 2003: Todd Bryant, posthumously First Lieutenant Todd Bryant, the first member of his West Point class to fall in that war.

IMAGES OF THE ENEMY

J. Glenn Gray thought hard about images, what he called images of the enemy, and he dedicated the book to his wife: “To Ursula, my wife, formerly one of the enemy.” Two years after the conclusion of his war, in 1947, he married Ursula Werner, a German woman he met while serving. So his relationship with the enemy was very, very complicated. And as I was reading this book, I became conscious of another book that I’ve recently read, What It is Like to Go to War, by Karl Marlantes. Karl Marlantes is an interesting guy. A Rhodes Scholar who left Oxford in 1969, he felt it was wrong that he was at Oxford while his buddies were in Vietnam. He volunteered for service in Vietnam and distinguished himself there, earning a Navy Cross, the nation’s second highest award for valor. He wrote a book about it in 1970, called Matterhorn, and he couldn’t publish it for forty years, not until 2010. It became a New York Times best seller.

I didn’t think there was another book that could be written about Vietnam, but I was wrong. It is an unbelievably powerful book. In Matterhorn, he tells the story fictionally. In What it is Like to Go to War, the non-fiction sequel to Matterhorn, Marlantes tells the actual story, the true story of a man he killed in Vietnam while assaulting a bunker complex. These were the actions for which he was awarded the Navy Cross. He killed this young Vietnamese man. They looked each other in the eyes, and Marlantes shot first. And thirty-five years later, while he was driving at night, that man appeared in front of him in the windshield of his car. Karl knew from that episode that he needed to write about what had happened. Both Marlantes and Gray write about different ways to think about the enemy. They both agree that there is something instinctive in the human spirit that leads us to want to confront our enemy, to take on our enemy.

I have a photograph of my then-young son behind an M16 trainer, pretending to shoot. It is not a posed shot. It is not me telling my son to put on his war face, but he puts on an expression that I’ve seen before, and I was so struck by that expression. You may think that as the son of an army officer, he got pushed in this direction by me. However, my wife is a poet, a student of French and German literature. She is pulling just as hard the other way. Already at five he is focused on an imaginary enemy.

THE ACHE OF GUILT

J. Glenn Gray says something that had great appeal to me, having fought two wars, both in tanks
from some distance. The further you are away from the people you are fighting, the easier it is to fight them, and the less likely you are to have their faces pop up in front of you because you never see their faces. They are just hot spots on a thermal screen. Yet guilt can come close very rapidly.

At the end of September 2003, I responded in a tank to an improvised explosive device that killed a scout and wounded one or two others in a pretty tough little firefight. There were heads popping up on buildings to my right and suddenly there was a man with what appeared to be a rocket-propelled grenade launcher (RPG) on his shoulder. The sun was behind this person, and I turned my tank to fire on this person and the grenade he was apparently launching against my tank. Before I could fire, my gunner — inside the tank he had better optics than I did — said, “Stop. Civilian.” It was not an RPG but a TV camera. So I came one second, maybe two seconds from launching a tank round against a civilian journalist, whom I certainly would have killed. It was that kind of war in which the journalists were mixed in among the people fighting. This story points to the confusion inherent in war and the innocents who get caught up in the fighting. It also points to how close one can be to the ache of guilt.

If you are fighting with drones, the enemy can be half a world away. And something is lost when we don’t have to confront our enemies directly. Gray talks about that, too.

This is not a pleasant thing to say or for any of us to think about. It’s like that expression on my son’s face. For many people and many acts of violence, it’s not unpleasant. It could become habit, Gray says. Among men who have survived, there’s a capacity for criminal deeds and the obscure yearning for license to act without consequences. You think of things like Lord of the Flies, which I hope you had to read in high school, and how fragile civilization is. How quickly it can fall apart. Gray clearly felt this desire to act without consequences. This is a guy who got his Ph.D. in philosophy on Heidegger. This is not your average guy. If he has this kind of feeling, the social bonds that restrain our behavior are fragile.

THE FUTURE OF WAR

In his last chapter, Gray thinks about what war is going to look like in the future. I want to spend a little more time on this because this is something I think about professionally, as a political scientist. War made me feel alive in a way I have not felt alive before or since. There is something extremely exciting about being in combat, and many men have trouble coming down from that high when they return home. This results in dangerous behavior, mostly in young men. Women don’t appear to be affected quite the same way. But a bunch of young men get killed in drunk driving accidents and motorcycle accidents, those sorts of tragedies. They survive a year in combat and then they die within a month of coming home, because they engage in risky behavior, in trying to get that high, that high that J. Glenn Gray felt in WWII.
Gray quoted Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., at one point. “The faith is true and adorable,”—I thought “adorable” was an incongruous word, a powerful and strong word—“which leads a soldier to throw away his life in obedience to a blindly accepted duty, in a cause which he little understands, in a plan of campaign of which he has no notion, under tactics of which he does not see the use.”\textsuperscript{11} This makes me think of Iraq, an unnecessary war, a war we didn’t need to fight, a war in which young men and women did what they believed their nation needed them to do. All too often dying unnecessarily, but believing in their country, believing that they are called to serve that higher purpose. And in every war soldiers fall unnecessarily. They follow their duty.

When I wrote my Rhodes Scholarship essay, an experience that I hope many of you will have, I reflected on a visit I took when I was just a little older than you. I was a junior, turning into a college senior, on a visit to Dachau, which was not one of the Nazi death camps but was still a deeply horrible place. I visited Auschwitz years later, which is the worst place in the world. But I wrote about Dachau and at the Rhodes interview, I was asked why I had written about Dachau and not about one of the American military cemeteries, which the interviewer correctly assumed I had visited. I told her that I thought that there was a nobility to soldiers who fell fighting that was not true for those who were murdered at Dachau. Those are two different kinds of deaths. And a death that doesn’t need to happen has more pathos, and so we had a discussion about that. If I could ask all of humanity to do one thing, it would be to visit Auschwitz, or to visit any one of the camps and to see what man does to man.

On a slightly more positive note, I’m a big fan of a book which was first published in the 1980s, \textit{Future Shock}, by Alvin Toffler.\textsuperscript{12} It argues that there have only been three revolutions through all of human history. The first revolution was the agricultural revolution, when we stopped being hunter-gatherers and learned to domesticate plants and animals, which allowed civilization to happen. This allowed the human population to explode. It took a millennium to figure out how to domesticate plants and animals and thousands of years for that to happen. Life proceeded broadly that way for another three thousand or four thousand years until the Industrial Revolution in the 1700s and 1800s, when we learned to harness not just animal power but dinosaur power, when we learned to harness the power of coal and oil. That revolution took centuries.

We are now living through the third revolution in this history that Toffler wrote about back in the 1970s, the Information Revolution. The digitization of information so that we can now instantly have access to all of the knowledge that humankind has accumulated over 5,000 years of history instantaneously, at essentially no cost. This changes everything. It used to be that we taught college freshman facts. It no longer makes sense to teach you facts. If you need a fact, you can get it instantly. We need to teach you other things in this Information Revolution world. We need to teach you how to use...
ideas. We need to teach you how to creatively collaborate. We need to teach you a whole new different series of skill sets because facts are no longer a comparative advantage.

Thinking about these revolutions has implications for almost everything in human behavior. Certainly the impact in warfare, in the warfare of the Information Age, will be great. In the warfare of the Industrial Revolution and the Agricultural Age, mountaintops and road intersections were key terrain. Those are still important, but what is most important to the wars of today, the Vietnam War, the War in Iraq, the War in Afghanistan, is the population. It’s the people. So you need a whole different skill set. To win the wars of today, you have to understand the people of the country that you are fighting. And you have to work to build a brighter future for them. In many ways it is a much more difficult task than simply defeating them.

Steven Pinker wrote the book *The Better Angels of Our Nature* to try to understand why warfare is becoming less prevalent. The fact is that the incidence of warfare has declined despite our perception that violence is increasing, and Steven Pinker says we currently have less violence as a percentage of the population than ever in human history. Big wars like those that marked the first half of the twentieth century: the First World War in which twenty million were killed; the Second World War in which fifty million were killed; the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, a fifty year war. Those wars are gone. Instead, we are fighting much smaller wars. We are just seeing them more rapidly and more dramatically because of the power of the Information Revolution.

One of the things people think has happened, me included, is that nuclear weapons have made it impossible for states to have that big kind of war anymore. Which is to say that nuclear weapons— as bad and horrible as they are— have reduced human suffering. That’s not intuitive.

The other factor is that ever since nuclear weapons became a part of the international system in 1945, the United States has enjoyed perpetual military superiority over the rest of the world. That has also made warfare less prevalent, particularly in Asia. Many people fear a Great Power war with China, which would be back to the levels of warfare that J. Glenn Gray saw in the Second World War, but I believe that that is unlikely to happen. These two factors of nuclear weapons and U.S. conventional military superiority, along with some others, make war between the United States and China an unlikely phenomenon.

Globalization is a function of the Information Revolution, the instantaneous transfer of goods and services around the globe, and of urbanization, people increasingly living in cities. A hundred million Chinese every three years move from the countryside to the cities. In three years, the equivalent of the entire population of the United States will move into cities across China. Partly as a result of urbanization, of the Information Revolution, and of climate change, population growth will continue, probably for the
rest of this century. All those people living in cities, consuming resources, leads to a period of rapid strategic change that is going to mark your lives. Globalization is likely to be how this era is remembered. Climate change is likely to be the biggest problem we face in this century—not future wars, which J. Glenn Gray worried about, but climate change.

I participated in a conference in Washington in March of 2013, the tenth anniversary of the invasion of Iraq. We were trying to figure out how we had gone so far wrong. At that meeting Marine General John Allen, off the cuff, made, in my eyes, this very smart statement. He said:

As we reset our forces for the future, we’ve got to maintain our faithfulness to the basic intellectual principles of irregular warfare, the components of which are such things as the proper deployment of development, understanding the relationship of subnational and national governance, the social fabric in which you’re going to operate. These are Ph.D.-level intellectual demands on our officers. We cannot permit that to go. 14

These represent a different level of intellectual demands than those that J. Glenn Gray confronted when he knew who his enemy was, when he could see his enemy in front of him.

As you read J. Glenn Gray, think about war as a human experience that just keeps happening. Remember the cost it imposes on young people who look just like you. And if you are so moved, study history and economics and political science and international relations and the fields of languages and cultures and help us think through why we keep resorting to violence. And help us find a better way. Or, if that is not you, learn science and psychology to help us to take care of those who come back from war forever changed. People like J. Glenn Gray, who I am convinced had a severe case of post-traumatic stress disorder and dealt with it by writing, just as my friend Karl Marlantes did. Karl talks explicitly, in a way that J. Glenn Gray doesn’t, about the toll his war exerted on his family for the next forty years. About the walls he punched through in his family home, about the fact that he kept his family moving. He could never find a base, a center, after the experiences he had in the Vietnam War. And so, back to the original thesis of the book, war changes people, very seldom for the better. And so anything that we can do to make war less likely, to help those who’ve had to endure its pain, these are noble services.

And I encourage you—as you think about your lives, as you begin this experience in this community you can love and serve—to dedicate yourself to understanding this world in which you live. This world has marked all of you, and you should ask my generation and the generation in front of mine why we haven’t gotten further than we have so far, and you should resolve to do a better job than we have.

When the Wall fell in Berlin, the twentieth century came to an end. We can define the twentieth century as going from 1914, when World War I started, to the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and that whole period was one long war. And so one of the things I hope you’ll take from this talk is that war
marks the human experience, and it has marked the American experience less than many countries, but still it’s been a critically important part of the American experience. It’s changed the way we are, and I think it’s changed the way you are.

War can be painted as noble, uplifting, and even cleansing. People hungered for the First World War, during the new age of Darwin and eugenics, and people literally wrote that the war would be good because it could cleanse the blood of the population. The weak would fall and the strong would rise and we would build a better society. However, there is a disconnect between this sense of glory and the history that has been drawn in blood. I hope that I have painted a complicated picture of war and a complicated picture of human nature, and helped you ask hard questions about why this continues to happen, in a manner that does justice to the military and intellectual service, and to the lasting legacy of Juniata graduate J. Glenn Gray.

NOTES

2. Ibid., p. 27.
3. Ibid.
14. J. Dana Stuster, “To COIN or Not? A decade later, what lessons haven't we learned from the war in Iraq that we should,” Foreign Policy, March 18, 2013. http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/03/18/to-coin-or-not/.