

We Choose to See No Evil: How Ordinary Americans Perpetuate an Oppressive,
Counterinsurgent System

A war has been brewing on American soil post 9/11, affecting all Americans. Taking inspiration from past modern warfare strategies in countries such as Algeria, a counterinsurgent form of government settled here in the United States, ruling civilians with an ‘iron fist’, per se. But this is not the typical “Orwellian” state that is expected with this rhetoric; citizens have become completely used to, desensitized to, and even *enjoy* participating in the legalized methods our government is utilizing to carry out the three prongs of counterinsurgency. These prongs, as defined in Bernard E. Harcourt’s *The Counterrevolution: How Our Government Went to War Against Its Own Citizens*, highlight the way in which the US Government is most focused on finding the people who wish to cause harm, or create the illusion of this group, in a very methodical approach: total information awareness, identifying/eradicating the active minority, and winning hearts and minds. However, a counterinsurgent government is not sustained primarily through its leaders and policies. Harcourt argues that *all* Americans, defined as the passive majority, participate in The Counterrevolution by staying complacent/enjoying this complacency, alongside voting for/promoting elected officials with counterinsurgent policies. By doing so, all Americans not only isolate and villainize a fabricated active minority but support a system of ultimate surveillance and oppression with that insurgent minority lacking. To resist this system of totalitarian government, Harcourt then argues that Americans can get involved in resistance efforts against counterinsurgent policies, leaders, and oppression.

Firstly, it is significant to understand how exactly ordinary Americans participate in the Counterrevolution. Harcourt begins his argument that the United States Government villainizes Muslim individuals, for example, and paints them to be a group of insurgents; a group that

wishes to harm the American people and to create general terror. This then causes the public to uphold this fabricated “narrative of insurrection that turns whole groups and neighborhoods - of American Muslims or Mexicans, of African Americans, of Hispanics, of peaceful protesters - into suspected insurgents” (13). So not only do individuals begin to subconsciously adhere to these ideas of “American villains” on our home soil, per se, an idea fabricated “out of whole cloth” by our government, but they stay complacent when this oppression is exerted. This then highlights the concept of the “neutral majority”, or individuals that can be influenced in either direction by our government, with the options being to support, denounce, or stay complacent to oppressive treatment of this falsified active minority. Harcourt points to David Galula, a French counterinsurgency theorist with experience in the Algerian War who states, “The technique of power consists on relying on the favorable minority in order to rally the neutral majority and to neutralize or eliminate the hostile minority” (30). With that being said, a majority of Americans must support or have a general neutral stance on the eradication and villainization of these presumed “dangerous individuals” in order to perpetuate The Counterrevolution on American soil. Harcourt argues that it is also simple for ordinary Americans to stay complacent and directly participate in the counterinsurgency through willingness and pleasure to be distracted by the internet, alongside actively *adding to* the government data collection effort. Ever since the popularization of the internet, the US Government has utilized programs like UPSTREAM and PRISM to intercept and store *all* communications, searching through them for potential threats, and pinpointing targets with IP addresses (58). This then highlights the concern of willingness to participate in data collection by the government. Harcourt argues that the American population enjoys speaking about themselves and revealing every facet of their personality on the internet, stemming from an almost narcissistic place, aiding the government with knowing and

discovering more information about ourselves (157-160). The government, social media platforms, and corporations even *encourage* “to expose and express ourselves as much as possible, leaving digital traces that [permits]... government...to profile and then try to shape us accordingly,” (194). So, by being entranced by the expository nature of posting about one’s beliefs, location and life, everyday Americans *enjoy* allowing the counterinsurgency to expand and continue to oppress the invisible active minority. But not only does digital technology help the government gain more information, but it helps to control and distract the already complacent masses, causing the focus to be on *positive* memes and apps as opposed to the reports highlighting *negative* atrocities committed by the government. Harcourt titles Chapter 10 as “Distracting Americans” - and rightfully so - for “many of us will not recognize ourselves, or America for that matter, in these dreadful episodes...” when faced with technological distraction (181). The examples of waterboarding, targeted assassinations, militarization of police, infiltration of Muslim mosques/student groups, and immense data collection by our government are all things that we overlook, as Harcourt mentions, to pay attention to things like the practically nonsensical “Damn Daniel” meme and similar content, or to blissfully immerse ourselves in the virtual world of Pokémon GO (181-183). Harcourt even adds that “most of us are blissfully ignorant...of these counterinsurgency practices at home and abroad, and are consumed unsteady by the seductive distractions of our digital age” (181). Therefore, it is evident that Americans directly participate in The Counterrevolution through complacency of two kinds - the witnessing or participation in villainization of a supposed active minority, and the pleasure to expose oneself to the public online while becoming fully immersed in/distracted by the internet with enjoyment.

Counterinsurgency not only prevails with a *lack* of action and blissful ignorance by our citizens, but with the *active* action being taken to promote counterinsurgent policies: the voting for and promoting of leaders and policies who directly affect the measure to which The Counterrevolution will be upheld. While Harcourt does not assign the blame on one political party or administration, leaders in general have the ability to influence what legislation they choose to focus on. Harcourt solidifies this idea of administrative, executive power with, “The Counterrevolution was well in place before the election of President Donald Trump, but his election, if anything, sealed the transformation” (14). So, everyday Americans do indeed participate directly in The Counterrevolution by providing a platform for and electing leaders and their administrations to enact policy changes. Harcourt poses that the Bush Administration’s primary focus was “the war on terror” or creating an active minority yet again “out of whole cloth”. Whether this enemy was fabricated or not, the main goal of Bush’s presidency became to identify those who were responsible for the 9/11 attacks and prevent anything like that from happening again with his “kill list”. Obama’s presidency also bled into these efforts with focus on drone killings “for American safety” (3). These policies, all deriving from the administrations voted into office, showcases how we, Americans, uphold the counterinsurgency by supporting these leaders and the policies that result from their power. A more direct, in-depth example that Harcourt describes is that of Donald Trump and his presidency. One may argue that ordinary citizens could not possibly think up the counterinsurgent policies that result once an official or administration is elected into office - we are not psychic and cannot predict every policy at the time of voting. However, with someone like Donald Trump, this was not the case. Donald Trump outlined multiple counterinsurgent policies in his *campaign promises* such as increased military spending, the need for a southern border wall, the “Muslim Ban”, etc. (208-209). And afterward,

he was *then* elected into office by millions of Americans that supported his values, which allowed him to perpetuate these promised counterinsurgent mechanisms. Harcourt calls this “one of the greatest tragedies...that so many Americans knowingly embraced The Counterrevolution when they cast their ballots for Trump in November 2016” (209). With this newfound position of power permitted directly by voters, Trump established these three prongs of a counterinsurgent government further; He called to action the need for waterboarding and the use of the Guantánamo prison to gain total information awareness, he profiled Muslims and Mexicans as dangerous individuals as criminals, terrorists, and rapists, and, he successfully distracted the masses with his online presence on Twitter, alongside other policy changes that directly contributed to The Counterrevolution (210-211). Therefore, Harcourt makes it evident that everyday Americans further The Counterrevolution by promoting and electing officials with knowingly counterinsurgent policies, and urges that voters should be wary of what policies and people they support in the first place and for what reason.

Harcourt then calls readers to action to prevent The Counterrevolution from becoming a permanent, debilitating system for future generations to come. Being that The Counterrevolution and all of its terror is knowingly embraced or ignored by Americans through online complacency or promotion of administrations, Harcourt argues that “a fully coherent and systematic paradigm should neither render us complacent nor resigned, but rather, on the contrary...intolerably insolent” (252). In other words, Harcourt *wants* Americans to be uncomfortable with and fight against the fact that this method of a counterinsurgent government affects everyone, especially those isolated and villainized by the government beyond any reason. However, people taking action should not be too ambitious either, which can take away from efforts to lessen counterinsurgent measures (252). Names like Angela Davis, James Baldwin, Daniel Ellsberg, all

are alluded to in order to showcase the type of political activism Harcourt wishes that people continue - consistent, courageous, and risky efforts. Harcourt also mentions modern political groups that people can get involved in, that are directly fighting counterinsurgent methods today, like the Black Lives Matter Movement, Critical Resistance, the New Sanctuary Coalition NYC, the American Civil Liberties Union, etc. (253-254). By listing quite a number of these social activism groups that are still active in their efforts, Harcourt indirectly urges readers to research more about the missions of each resistance effort, and wants to motivate readers to get involved instead of the complacency that the passive majority is used to.

Being that all Americans have complacent participation in data efforts, complacency toward the fabricated “active minority”, pleasure to expose oneself online leading to easier data collection, and willingness to be distracted by positive internet sensations, it can be said that all Americans effectively further The Counterrevolution, as mentioned prior. Harcourt initially expresses this message in *The Counterrevolution: How Our Government Went to War Against Its Own Citizens*, to gain more awareness and eventually more resistance against oppressive actions and policies enacted by government. If we, as citizens and voters, are aware of the villainization of a non-existent, profiled group of insurgents, we can stand up to the oppressors. If we, as citizens and voters, are aware of the waterboarding, prison torture, infiltration of Muslim communities, immense data collection, distraction by internet, and politicians’ proposed counterinsurgent policies that Harcourt describes, we can stop the general complacency of the “passive majority” and take on these policies one at a time for the better of humankind. We can *choose* to see this evil and resist it accordingly.

Works Cited

Harcourt, Bernard E. *The Counterrevolution: How Our Government Went to War Against Its Own Citizens*. Basic Books, 27 Feb. 2018.