

BOOK REVIEWS

Review of *Ethics and Counterrevolution: American Involvement in Internal Wars*

Sarah Caine, MDiv^a

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Ethics and Counterrevolution: American Involvement in Internal Wars. By Kermit D. Johnson. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998. 344 pages.

Kermit D. Johnson, a former U.S. Army Chief of Chaplains, wrote *Ethics and Counterrevolution: American Involvement in Internal Wars* in the immediate aftermath of the end of the Cold War. He argues against the misconception that revolutions ended with the Cold War. Johnson highlights U.S. involvement in Latin American revolutions and counterrevolutions as an effective synecdoche for harmful U.S. influence around the world—from the foundation of the country through the Red Scare. Johnson uses examples from his own professional experience and U.S. history grounded in Liberation Theology to argue for a new direction for U.S. foreign policy. This new direction centers the Hippocratic principle “do no harm” as a measure for how the U.S. interacts with other countries.

Johnson writes not primarily for chaplains but “to encourage the opening of public debate about America’s involvement in counterrevolutionary wars, a subject hitherto addressed covertly and furtively by a tiny elite.”¹ John Brinsfield, former Chaplain Corps historian, called Johnson’s book “a wake-up call for change” and assigned it as part of his ethics course at Army War College in 1998.² *Ethics and Counterrevolution* remained on the US Army War College ethics bibliography until at least 2000.³ It is an extremely helpful resource for chaplains who take the role of ethical adviser seriously.

^a **Chaplain (Captain) Sarah Caine** serves as an Active Duty Army chaplain, currently in a Field Hospital/Hospital Center, and recently returned from a rotation in Kuwait where she served as chaplain for U.S. Military Hospital-Kuwait and acting Command Chaplain for 3rd Medical Command (Forward). Chaplain Caine holds a B.A. in Linguistics from California State University, Northridge, a M.Div. from Starr King School for the Ministry, she graduated from the Army Clinical Pastoral Education program in 2023 and is working toward her Doctorate of Ministry from Wesley Theological Seminary. She loves her non-binary spouse, Ian, and their two cats.

¹ Kermit D. Johnson, *Ethics and Counterrevolution: American Involvement in Internal Wars* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998), xxvi.

² John Brinsfield, review of *Ethics and Counter-revolution: American Involvement in Internal Wars*, by Kermit Johnson, 1999 in *The Army Chaplaincy* (Summer-Fall 1999) <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00062435/00008/images/108>.

³ U.S. Army War College, “Ethics: A Selected Bibliography,” ed. Virginia C. Shope, March 2000, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA377384.pdf>.

In the introduction, Johnson provides a potent example of the tension between the pastoral and prophetic roles of chaplains, even at the strategic level of the Army. In 1982, while Johnson was serving as Chief of Chaplains, the Chief of Staff of the Army requested “a paper on the moral issues of nuclear war and the conflict in El Salvador.”⁴ Johnson wrote a paper which utilized the Socratic method to prompt the Army staff to reflect on the morality of specific types of military engagement. The questions reference both general and specific situations.⁵

“Staffers in the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans”⁶ claimed that it was “inappropriate for Army spokesman (*sic*) to undertake responding to questions such as those raised in the Chief of Chaplains’ paper. Those questions involve issues concerning the ‘rightness’ or ‘justness’ of national decisions which are by law the responsibility and prerogative of civilian authority to formulate.”⁷

Johnson had to contend with a “three-star general” who “claimed that [his] questions were ‘immoral questions’” and that “they went right down the line of disinformation.”⁸ Johnson’s approach was vindicated by the Truth Commission for El Salvador ten years later.⁹ At the time, senior leaders were not willing to entertain moral and ethical reflection as part of the decision making process. John Brinsfield wrote about this moral confrontation in his history of the Chaplain Corps from 1975-1995. He called Johnson “the Army’s Moral Theologian,” saying, “Johnson did not embrace the role of a prophet glibly. He knew that professional loyalty strictly prescribed what comments he could make as Chief of Chaplains.”¹⁰

4 Johnson, *Ethics and Counterrevolution* xviii.

5 “Is it right for the United States to support a regime whose military forces systematically and spontaneously engage in violence against its own people? Why should we provide military support, advisers, and training to an undisciplined army which slaughters innocent victims? Does not our military support forfeit any leverage we might have with respect to eliminating atrocities? Would the insurgency still be taking place even if there were no outside support? What is the basis of evidence to support the presidential certification that human rights have improved in the last year? Does a military solution appear possible? If so, at what cost and would the cost justify any expected gains? Why are we not pressing harder for a negotiated settlement? With over 30,000 Salvadorans killed since 1979, at what point do we conclude that this ‘destroying to save’ represents a one-way genocidal direction?” Johnson, *Ethics and Counterrevolution*, xix. To draw a modern parallel, substitute “at least 65,141 Palestinians since Oct 8, 2023.” This death toll is current as of September 18, 2025, find updated numbers here: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/3/18/gaza-tracker>. This calculation only reflects those whose identities have been confirmed, there are projected to be “three to 15 times greater” deaths. See Rasha Khatib, Martin McKee, and Salim Yusuf, “Counting the Dead in Gaza: Difficult but Essential,” *Lancet* 404, no. 10449 (July 1, 2024), [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736\(24\)01169-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(24)01169-3).

6 Gen. William R Richardson held this position 1981-1983. See J.H. Binford Peay III, “Evolution of the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans 1903-1991,” Department of the Army, November 1991, <https://history.army.mil/portals/143/Images/Publications/catalog/70-17.pdf>.

7 Johnson, *Ethics and Counterrevolution*, xviii-xix.

8 Johnson, *Ethics and Counterrevolution*, xx.

9 Johnson, *Ethics and Counterrevolution*, xx-xxi.

10 John Brinsfield, *Encouraging Faith, Supporting Soldiers: A History of the U.S. Army Chaplaincy, 1975-1995* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1997), 144-47.

Johnson examines how the United States creates or backs dictators rather than civilian populations. He provides multiple examples of democratic norms in other countries being waylaid by U.S. expansionist visions.¹¹ He notes the irony that “U.S. recognition of the root causes of revolution has been superficial at best” despite our revolutionary origins.¹² This superficial understanding means U.S. “pressure on the repressive or exploitative regime” is never more than pushing for “image-polishing to mild reform,” without any meaningful change.¹³ Johnson points out that the “failure of a government to contribute to the correction of social ills or grievances of the people” is an unwelcome mirror for the U.S. He suggests that the U.S. has not yet fully reckoned with its own hostile policies toward people raising grievances¹⁴ or the genocidal roots of its founding.¹⁵ He contends that strategic leaders who remain focused on asserting the justice of foreign policy misdeeds do not understand the “conditions that encourage popular revolt”¹⁶ nor the importance of letting the people of a country make their grievances known. In other words, a country unable to hold itself accountable for atrocities of the past will struggle to hold allies accountable for atrocities in the present.

The U.S., according to Johnson, often ignores evidence of massacres and human rights abuses by allied militaries.¹⁷ He examines the legacy of U.S.-backed dictators from the Monroe Doctrine, to the acquisition of the Philippines, to the School of the Americas¹⁸ for training dictators, and summarizes twentieth century U.S. foreign policy. He takes both Jimmy

11 Johnson poignantly summarizes that revolution happens because they are “rooted in intolerable grievances and causes—intolerable not because these inhuman conditions are set by divine decree, but because they are humanly contrived, and therefore changeable. This is why people revolt.” See Johnson, *Ethics and Counterrevolution*, 34. This is reminiscent of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr’s speech “The Other America,” in which he said, “A riot is the language of the unheard.” Martin Luther King Jr, “The Other America” (April 14, 1967), 24:03. <https://youtu.be/cYK9xGALPrU?si=7wp9subLatkGnvGl&t=1443>.

12 Johnson, *Ethics and Counterrevolution*, 29.

13 Johnson, *Ethics and Counterrevolution*, 29.

14 King, “The Other America.”

15 Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous People’s History of the United States* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 2014). The “Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide,” provides a good overview on the problem and nature of genocide. See United Nations, The “Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide,” December 9, 1948, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-prevention-and-punishment-crime-genocide>

16 Johnson, *Ethics and Counterrevolution*, 30.

17 Johnson, *Ethics and Counterrevolution*, 146-47, 229-35.

18 The School of the Americas (SOA) is now called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC). SOA/WHINSEC has also been called the “School of Assassins” and “School of Dictators.” It was protested by the only person to give back his Medal of Honor—CH Charles Liteky—until his death in 2017. Blake Stilwell, “This Is the Only Medal of Honor Recipient to Ever Give It Back,” *Military.com*, July 30, 2020, <https://www.military.com/off-duty/only-medal-of-honor-recipient-ever-give-it-back.html>. WHINSEC continues to be protested by groups like School of the Americas Watch which was founded by Father Roy Bourgeois in response to the state killings of six Jesuit priests and two women at the University of Central America in San Salvador. See School of the Americas Watch, “About SOA Watch,” SOA Watch, August 25, 2021, <https://soaw.org/about-soa-watch>.

Carter and Ronald Reagan to task for their support of the military of El Salvador and Nicaraguan contras when the use of Death Squads was well known.¹⁹

Johnson witnessed his contemporaries fall into a pattern of compromising human rights for political power. That story continues to unfold today, as seen in the military and financial backing of governments and movements in Central Asia,²⁰ the Arabian Peninsula, and the Levant.²¹ U.S. involvement in Latin America was justified as necessary to beat communist movements seen as Soviet expansionism which was considered a threat to national security. This same justification was later used to arm the mujaheddin in Afghanistan²² and to argue in favor of greatly increasing the military and financial support of Israel.²³ None of these actions made the U.S. safer or improved the lives of the people in those locations.²⁴

Johnson suggests the U.S. should only use its influence and power when we can adhere to a policy rooted in “do no harm.”²⁵ Shifting to a “do no harm” framework requires the belief that all people everywhere have a right to self-determination, even when that determination is at odds with U.S. foreign policy goals.²⁶ Johnson lays out six parts of enacting this “do no harm” ethic, each part contains much more nuanced discussion than this review can offer:

1. Have a unitary foreign policy which supports civilian rule and civilian control over the military.
2. Eliminate military aid to Third World forces and convert into economic aid in civilian sector.

19 Johnson writes: “A week after [Archbishop Oscar] Romero’s assassination, Carter approved \$5.7 million military aid for El Salvador, unbelievably to “help strengthen the army’s key role in reforms.” The following November, six Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR) politicians were assassinated by the military, as were four U.S. churchwomen in December.” See Johnson, *Ethics and Counterrevolution*, 76-77. Similarly, Johnson points out that “the Reagan administration’s distinction between good authoritarian and bad totalitarian governments did not make the human rights issue go away. . . . Outrageous human rights violations by American-backed authoritarian governments such as political assassinations, torture, massacres and disappearances did not escape the notice of the American people.” See Johnson, *Ethics and Counterrevolution*, 80.

20 Johnson, *Ethics and Counterrevolution*, 56-59.

21 Mayram Jamshidi, “Instruments of Dehumanization,” *Boston Review*, December 9, 2023, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/instruments-of-dehumanization/>.

22 Johnson, *Ethics and Counterrevolution*, 76-81.

23 Faye Hammad, “A Brief History of the US-Israel ‘Special Relationship’ Shows How Connections Have Shifted since Long before the 1948 Founding of the Jewish State,” *The Conversation*, November 29, 2023, <https://theconversation.com/a-brief-history-of-the-us-israel-special-relationship-shows-how-connections-have-shifted-since-long-before-the-1948-founding-of-the-jewish-state-215781>. This piece highlights the anti-Soviet motivations for US military support of Israel.

24 Keith Tighe, “Israel: Strategic Asset or Strategic Liability?” (2013), <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA602527.pdf>. Tighe sometimes uses the word “Jews” as shorthand for Zionist settlers as do some of his sources and I find this uncomfortable due to the potentially anti-Jewish tone and the inherent erasure of the Arab Jewish population (the term “Mizrahi Jew” comes from the word for “Oriental” or “eastern” and is often used by people trying to separate themselves from an Arab identity) by oversimplification into an Arabs v. Jews conflict. Tighe does some clarification in his paper, but I wish he had used better phrasing throughout.

25 Johnson, *Ethics and Counterrevolution*, 269-72.

26 Johnson, *Ethics and Counterrevolution*, 267-72.

3. Eliminate arms transfers except when a Third World nation is threatened by outside attack or when a true democracy is threatened internally.
4. Cut off U.S. military programs which legitimize and strengthen host nation military forces [rather than the self-determination of the civilian population].
5. Support region-wide demilitarization through international agreements.
6. Support long term development programs, debt relief, technical assistance, training and credit provisions for small farmers and businesses, and other programs which reduce economic and social inequity.²⁷

I like the simplicity of the tenet “do no harm,” though enacting it is much more complicated. Shifting to a policy of “do no harm” would require the U.S. to face some uncomfortable truths. The U.S. has not attempted this ethic in its 250 years. There will be challenges to a shift away from policies that enable governments to kill tens of thousands of non-combatants to maintain superficial allyships.²⁸ The U.S. would have to take accountability, change policies, and speak more truthfully to be consistent in word and deed. The U.S. would need to make amends and repair relationships with those who endured maiming, starvation, and the emotional trauma of being deemed disposable.²⁹

There are, currently, at least four revolutionary/counterrevolutionary conflicts in which the U.S. is involved through military aid, humanitarian aid,³⁰ political-economic influence, or a mixture of the three. These are in Haiti,³¹

²⁷ Johnson, *Ethics and Counterrevolution*, 282-83.

²⁸ Rasha Khatib, Martin McKee, and Salim Yusuf, “Counting the Dead in Gaza: Difficult but Essential,” *Lancet* 404, no. 10449 (July 1, 2024), [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736\(24\)01169-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(24)01169-3).

²⁹ Jasbir Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017). See especially chapter 4, “‘Will Not Let Die’: Debilitation and Inhuman Biopolitics in Palestine,” 128-154. Puar’s book brings focus to the devastating and dehumanizing impacts of war beyond death. By pointing out higher rates of certain preventable illnesses and astounding number of child amputees in Palestine and the Middle East, Puar reminds readers that life (not only numbers of dead) must also be part of the human rights conversation.

³⁰ Sam Mednick, “How Is the New Gaza Aid Plan Supposed to Work – and Why Are so Many Aid Groups against It?,” AP News, May 26, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/gaza-humanitarian-foundation-aid-israel-distribution-hamas-e517f3dc7e73b3d52bec47ee31fc20df>.

³¹ Sandra Lemaire, “US ‘Committed’ to Working with Kenyan-Led Security Force for Haiti, Rubio Says,” Voice of America (Voice of America (VOA News), February 7, 2025), <https://www.voanews.com/a/voa-creole-us-committed-to-working-with-kenyan-led-security-force-for-haiti-rubio-says-/7967173.html>.

Sudan,³² Democratic Republic of the Congo,³³ and Palestine.³⁴ We live in times of live-streamed, soul-crushing, genocidal violence.³⁵ Maybe now is the time to heed the work of Johnson, with some motivation from theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer noted in 1934, “[P]eace must be dared. It is the great venture. It can never be made safe. Peace is the opposite of security. To demand guarantees is to mistrust, and this mistrust in turn brings forth war.”³⁶ If the U.S. dares to navigate the path through these difficult conversations, it will lead to true peace. We can challenge each other to do no harm.

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- 32 Otilie Mitchell and Cecilia Macaulay, “US Says Sudan Used Chemical Weapons in Civil War as It Issues New Sanctions,” *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)*, May 23, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cwynkdyk14zo>.
- 33 Alexis Arieff, “Democratic Republic of Congo: Background and U.S. Relations,” March 25, 2022, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R43166>.
- 34 Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, “U.S. Security Cooperation with Israel,” United States Department of State, October 19, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-israel/>.
- 35 Francesca Albanese, “Anatomy of a Genocide - Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian Territory Occupied since 1967 to Human Rights Council - Advance Unedited Version (A/HRC/55/73),” Question of Palestine (United Nations, March 24, 2024), <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/anatomy-of-a-genocide-report-of-the-special-rapporteur-on-the-situation-of-human-rights-in-the-palestinian-territory-occupied-since-1967-to-human-rights-council-advance-unedited-version-a-hrc-55/>. Since the initial draft of this article, the UN stated Israel has committed genocide in Gaza. Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel, “Legal Analysis of the Conduct of Israel in Gaza pursuant to the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide,” September 16, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session60/advance-version/a-hrc-60-crp-3.pdf>.
- 36 This quote is from Bonhoeffer’s famous “Peace Sermon” delivered on August 28, 1934. See Keith Clements, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Ecumenical Quest* (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches, 2015), 141, https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/Clements_Bonhoeffer_Ecumenical_Quest.pdf.