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Counterinsurgency and Professional Military Education

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Major Niel Smith's article "Integrating COIN into Army Professional Education" contains valuable insights and has provoked a large amount of fruitful dialogue on the *Small Wars Journal* website. What follows here is intended to add some thoughts to the discussion, to point out some challenges involved in achieving change, and to offer suggestions for overcoming those challenges. Although I am a professor at the Marine Corps University, these views are strictly my own, not those of the Marine Corps University.

When I was a course director at the Marine Corps Command and Staff College, I was responsible for adding large amounts of COIN instruction to the core curriculum from 2005 to 2007. Most of what I know, therefore, is based on Marine education, which is different in important ways from Army education. The much smaller size of the former allows it to change more quickly, and Marine culture puts less emphasis on doctrine than Army culture. Nevertheless, I think that much of what has been learned from teaching COIN at Marine Corps PME schools is applicable to the Army.

The educational outcomes specified on page 3 of Smith's article, derived from a 2007 conference at Ft. Leavenworth, are very useful. PME schools are accustomed to developing course content based on such a set of outcomes. This list attaches much weight to doctrine, and particularly to FM 3-24. Although I think FM 3-24 is a pretty good document, I have some serious reservations about it, and some of the commentaries on Smith's article also reflect concern about FM 3-24, for instance the validity of the "hearts-and-minds" theory that undergirds much of the manual. If you asked 100 COIN experts what they thought of FM 3-24 and what they thought should be taught about COIN in PME, you would get 100 different opinions. Given the lack of consensus, it becomes very difficult to get very specific on what we should teach on COIN.

Centralizing and standardizing COIN instruction also runs the risk of encouraging the inside-the-box thinking and risk-aversion that we have been trying to eliminate in recent years. If we spell out in great detail how COIN should be taught, many will be more inclined to take a checklist approach to training and education, and our officers will be more likely to employ a checklist approach in Afghanistan.

Another impediment to standardization of COIN training and education is the resistance that PME schools will inevitably mount. This resistance will be understandable, and perhaps even justified. These schools are constantly receiving bright ideas from outsiders about what they should teach, and they usually believe that those outsiders aren't qualified to make impositions

on their curriculum. Those impositions will require removing other items from the curriculum, to the detriment of non-COIN objectives that the school leaders consider important. At the Marine Corps University, where the faculty includes a large number of COIN experts with Ph.D.s, some professors have viewed much of the external preaching on COIN as amateurish and as an insult to their professional abilities.

I think we can standardize training to a much greater degree than education. We can teach standard staff processes and COIN TTPs in training. In the education courses at the Marine Corps University, we conduct exercises and teach seminars that provide some of that knowledge. We used to have much more in terms of lectures, but we found that lectures on doctrine and TTPs tended to be mind-numbing and sleep-inducing so we replaced most of them with more seminars and exercises.

My first recommendation would be to seek input from COIN experts on the faculties of the PME schools, as well as the commanders of those schools, in crafting centralized guidance on COIN. Too often such tasks are assigned to individuals who do not have the subject matter expertise or the teaching experience. I'd recommend including a COIN expert with extensive teaching experience from each of the schools in question. Of course, getting a committee of academics to work together and produce a unified document is a herculean task, so such a group would have to be led by someone with deep knowledge of COIN, strong organizational skills, a first-class intellect, and probably three or four stars.

Any centralized guidance on COIN should emphasize adaptation and initiative, and should avoid rigid prescriptions that will encourage inside-the-box thinking and risk aversion. An important part of COIN education should be to critique FM 3-24, given the disagreements over counterinsurgency basics and the tendency of effective counterinsurgency leaders to be independent thinkers who question conventional wisdom. Students should read theorists who take issue with FM 3-24, and conduct their own appraisals using historical cases.

At the Marine Corps University, we spend a large amount of time studying the history of counterinsurgency, in part no doubt because many of the professors are historians. I believe that extensive historical study is essential. (Disclosure: I am a historian) Without history, students are likely to become too enamored of theory, and to be unable to question theory adequately. Only history can produce the broad familiarity with the subject that Clausewitz rightly believed to be more important than mathematical or prepackaged solutions.

Too much of what is written about COIN is written by social scientists who do not have sufficient understanding of COIN history. Some social scientists do not fit into that category, but they are relatively small in number. Social scientists with little knowledge of specific counterinsurgencies often play a larger role in producing COIN doctrine than the historians who are intimately familiar with the specifics. Historians bear a part of the blame, because they have often shied away from entering debates about the present and entering the theoretical realm. Like it or not, military officers are heavily influenced by theories, so we ignore it at our, and their, peril. I wrote my recent book *A Question of Command* to fill what I saw as a serious void—counterinsurgency theory written by historians unbound by the methodological constraints of social science. That book consists of nine case studies, most of which were used in the course I

directed at the Command and Staff College, and general conclusions about counterinsurgency that can be drawn from those cases.

At the ILE and TLS levels, seminar discussion works better than lecturing; readings can be standardized, and course guides can be standardized, but the quality of delivery depends heavily on the individual instructor. One of the most beneficial themes of FM 3-24 is its emphasis on adaptation; to foster adaptive leadership; our educational programs need to require students to grapple with complex, non-linear problems for which there are no easy answers. Seminar discussions are an excellent way, if the right topics are covered. Exercises are also an excellent way, if we do not adhere slavishly to planning processes.

My experiences have convinced me that successful COIN exercises and seminars demand selecting the right readings. Some theoretical and historical works stimulate much more thought and generate many more ideas than others. Most PME schools have fairly stringent limits on the number of pages that can be assigned for a class, which rules out a large number of books. For instance, Sean Naylor's *Not A Good Day to Die* or Anthony Cordesman's *Iraqi Security Forces* would be great if we could require them as reading for one or two seminars, but we would have to assign them for four or five seminars, which is unfeasible.

As the first director of the Culture and Interagency Operations course at the Marine Corps Command and Staff College, which was largely centered on COIN, I have spent a good deal of time perusing the COIN literature and teaching it, so I'll offer my suggestions on readings, most of which I have used in my own seminars. The list does not include my three books, each of which I have used to teach COIN, as I'll leave it to others to assess their worth. The list also does not include countless other books that are wonderful works of scholarship but do not have the scope or the conciseness that work well in PME.

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