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Counterinsurgency vs. Counterterrorism: A Civilian's View

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Every twenty years or so, our Army has a furious internal debate over what kind of army it wants to be. We are not talking about an argument over civilian driven social experimentation such as the controversy over gays in the military; this one involves basic disagreement on how America's Army should doctrinally fight. With the exception of the Roman Catholic Church, nobody cherishes doctrine more than the U.S. Army and Air Force. The Marines consider doctrine to be a polite suggestion, and the Navy generally refuses to recognize the concept altogether.

The current debate raging among Army professionals is over how we should deal with insurgencies such as Iraq and Afghanistan. One side holds that the best way to defeat an insurgency is to win over the populace; this is loosely called population-centric counterinsurgency (COIN). The other school holds that the correct course is to kill the insurgents and destroy their cadres; this is known as counterterrorism (CT). The debate is less about tactics than it is about the future philosophical orientation of the Army beyond Afghanistan.

For the past year, I had the opportunity to view both sides of this argument, and I'd like to add a civilian perspective. I acted as the Senior Governance Advisor to an embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team (ePRT) in the Abu Ghraib area of Baghdad Province in Iraq. When we moved into the Abu Ghraib District last April, the ePRT and its partner U.S. Army Brigade Combat Team found a situation where the insurgency was still alive and kicking. Our forces controlled most of the urban area during the day, but the insurgents still controlled the rural areas and were active in the towns at night. It was a good laboratory to test counterinsurgency and counterterrorist theory. Numbers count; eventually we flowed three U.S. battalions into Abu Ghraib to reinforce the local Iraqi Security Forces to control the approximately 400,000 citizens of the district.

The U.S. Army tends to divide its efforts into two parts. It calls its counterinsurgency thrust non-lethal, while the term for counterterrorism is lethal targeting. At this state of the war in Iraq, most "lethal" targeting revolves around putting together arrest justifications for a range of miscreants; these include suspected insurgents, terrorists, and other criminals. Our ePRT concentrated on the non-lethal side to include reconstruction and building Iraqi governance capacity. Since the State Department does not have much money, we depended largely on the military side to provide funding for reconstruction projects.

These projects tended to be divided into two groups. The first were “feel good “efforts such as playgrounds, humanitarian assistance, and soccer fields; the second category included infrastructure reconstruction. The feel good projects were designed to win the proverbial “hearts and minds”; I prefer the term confidence building, but the former is in vogue. These were designed to get the population to stop assisting those who were shooting at us. The infrastructure projects were designed to repair war damage and get the district on the road to recovery. My governance team and I concentrated on infrastructure and mentoring local government officials on doing their jobs properly. Some of this work involved sitting in on local district (Qada’a) Council meetings, as well as gatherings of tribal Sheikhs who represent an informal but very real governance function. The rest of the time was spent in the field helping to supervise local governance activities ranging from trash pick-up to repair and maintenance of the critical irrigation canal system.

My observation of eight battalions spread between the two brigades that we worked with over the course of the ten month Abu Ghraib campaign, was that striking a balance between counterinsurgency and counterterrorism got the best results. Some battalions performed better than others, and those who got out and mingled with the population seemed to do best. Army non-lethal efforts tended to generate information that fed the lethal efforts. The population tended to be pragmatic if nothing else; if the American got killed, the projects would stop. By May 2009, we had suffered our last combat fatality, and the area is in the process of being handed over to the Iraqi Security forces to control.

It is entirely possible that the Iraqis may lose ground after the Americans are gone completely in August. If the March elections fuel an outbreak of sectarian violence, as many now predict, it will strengthen both the Sunni Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and the Jesh Al Mahdi (JAM) Shiite insurgent groups in Abu Ghraib and other recently pacified areas. It proved to be much more difficult to build confidence in civilian governance than it did to train security forces because, if the top down civilian bureaucracy is corrupt, it is very hard to make local changes stick. That doesn’t make it hopeless; it just makes it hard. The interagency civil-military partnership is far from perfect, but we are learning as we go.

I think the real issue here is that the soldiers who favor counterinsurgency fear that we will make the mistake of dropping that skill after Iraq and Afghanistan are concluded as we did after Vietnam. The counterterrorism school worries that the Army will lose its ability to fight conventional battles if it concentrates on counterinsurgency. However, this need not be a zero sum game. Many years ago the Marine Corps told the nation that it was not too proud to do windows, but the Marines are much smaller than the U.S. Army; the Army needs the same philosophy, but faces a much more complex problem. We need an Army that can whip China or Iran in a conventional war, if necessary, and also do windows.

Gary Anderson is a retired Marine Corps Colonel. He recently left the State Department after a year tour in Iraq.

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