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Lessons Learned, Lessons Lost

Mark Moyar

At last week's SAIS/Texas Tech conference "Lessons Learned, Lessons Lost: Counterinsurgency from Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan," the final panel assessed which lessons of the past have been applied or should be applied, and which have been disregarded or should be disregarded. As a member of that panel, and as someone who has visited Afghanistan recently, I think that the contents of the discussion will interest many readers of the *Small Wars Journal*, so I have recorded what I consider the most important lessons learned and lessons lost.

In a series of panels spanning two days, the conference concentrated for the most part on the relevance of counterinsurgency practices from Vietnam and Iraq to the current war in Afghanistan. One common theme was that we need to protect the population as Creighton Abrams and David Petraeus did, and as William Westmoreland and George Casey did not. Another was that we need to allocate more resources and people to non-military activities. Some speakers and audience members argued that we have been too concerned with a "top-down" approach in Afghanistan and ought to focus instead on "bottom-up" solutions like Vietnam's CIDGs in Vietnam and the Sons of Iraq, because the central governments in all three cases were weak. The most pessimistically inclined argued that Vietnam showed that an indigenous government without legitimacy and a powerful cause can never win a counterinsurgency and thus the Afghan enterprise is doomed.

This discourse is emblematic of much of what one hears about counterinsurgency today in government conference rooms, military lecture halls, newspaper offices, and think tanks. It is based on flawed interpretations of history as well as a misunderstanding of the nature of counterinsurgency, and therefore is in dire need of correction. Although there is value in discussing the merits of tactics centered on the population versus tactics centered on the enemy, or military activities versus non-military activities, or "top-down" approaches versus "bottom-up" approaches, those discussions do not get us very far. They also distract attention from the most important factor in the effectiveness of the counterinsurgency—the people responsible for leading counterinsurgency activities. In both Vietnam and Iraq, we spent years flailing around before we assigned a high priority to leadership. Robert Komer, who headed the pacification effort in Vietnam during the late 1960s, admitted afterwards, "I started out looking at Vietnam as a problem in resource allocation, and ended up looking at Vietnam more as a problem in getting the right Vietnamese in the right job. It was much less a question of the size of the [South

Vietnamese Army] or the size of the Vietnamese Civil Service than of the qualities of leadership."[1]

Contrary to widespread belief, General Westmoreland and General Casey understood the importance of the population in counterinsurgency. They assigned American forces a small role in population security because they believed that host-nation forces had natural advantages in interacting with the population and that host-nation forces should be required to operate on their own at an early stage to promote their development. This division of labor was based on the widely accepted counterinsurgency principle that the heavy lifting is best left to indigenous forces, which is embodied in the famous T. E. Lawrence quote that "Better the Arabs do it tolerably than that you do it perfectly." Westmoreland and Casey were unable to secure the population because the host-nation security forces failed to defeat the enemy in battle and alienated the population by robbing or beating them. In both instances, the defects in the indigenous security forces resulted from the low quality of indigenous officers.

Abrams and Petraeus succeeded because they inserted U.S. forces where the host-nation forces had failed, and because they enjoyed more success than their predecessors in helping the host-nation government improve the quality of its commanders. From 1968 to 1971, the South Vietnamese government replaced 20 provincial chiefs and 124 district chiefs, most of them at the urging of Abrams or his deputy for pacification, William Colby. Commenting on the performance of the South Vietnamese forces, Abrams remarked, "Leadership--where that's good, they're good. Where it's mediocre, they're mediocre. Where it's piss poor, they're piss poor. It's just that simple." In Iraq, during the critical year of 2007, Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker helped convince the Iraqi government to relieve seven of nine National Police brigade commanders and more than 2,000 Interior Ministry personnel.

Neither Abrams nor Petraeus abandoned offensive operations against the enemy, as proponents of population-centric counterinsurgency often claim. Abrams and Petraeus, like Westmoreland and Casey before them, recognized that success required both enemy-centric and population-centric operations. Offensive operations deprived the enemy of sanctuary areas where they could rest, recuperate, and mass forces for large attacks. Those offensive operations were especially important in Vietnam, where the enemy often operated in battalion strength and could easily annihilate dispersed counterinsurgency forces if allowed to roam free in the hinterlands.

Since assuming command in Afghanistan, General McChrystal has inserted large numbers of additional U.S. forces into the population security mission, with the numbers continuing to rise as the 30,000 troops of President Obama's surge arrive in country. Like the CAPs in Vietnam and certain regular U.S. Army and Marine units in Iraq, most American military forces are now partnered with Afghan security forces. The Americans are providing on-the-job training to their Afghan partners, emboldening them, and performing other functions that would be the responsibility of Afghan officers if the Afghan forces had sufficient numbers of experienced and capable officers.

[1] This quote and the other quotes and statistics cited herein are taken from *A Question of Command: Counterinsurgency from the Civil War to Iraq* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

The extent of partnering varies widely, primarily because of differences in the willingness and abilities of coalition commanders to work with Afghan forces. Although our own military is the best in the world, more remains to be done in appointing the commanders with the leadership attributes required for this mission. Commanders who fail to demonstrate those attributes, moreover, need to be admonished or relieved more often than is now the case.

We must also work harder to help the Afghan officers in partnered units become better leaders and not allow them to sit back to let the Americans do most of the work. The Americans best situated for that mission are the advisory teams attached to the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police. Some of the advisory teams have been scheduled for termination on the premise that the partnering of American and Afghan forces renders advisers unnecessary. But in reality the officers in American units are often too busy with other matters to invest the sort of effort into Afghan leadership development that advisers provide.

General McChrystal is also striving to improve the quality of Afghan leaders, and not just through on-the-job training. As I witnessed during a trip to Afghanistan in January, there is now an encouraging recognition that we will not be able to reduce our troop presence until the Afghans have military and police leaders who are good enough to operate independently. Lieutenant General William G. Caldwell, who recently took command of Afghan security force training, has declared Afghan leadership the top priority in 2010 for the NATO training mission, which in the past subordinated leader development to rapid troop generation. Previous leadership training programs were kept short to produce new forces quickly, but those forces deserted, defected, or abused the citizenry far more often than well-led forces.

Abbreviation of training has caused the greatest problems in the Afghan National Police. Training for police lieutenants has been as short as eight weeks, an amount considered absurd by police experts. The quality of instruction has suffered because of poor management by the State Department and its private contractors. In addition, the Afghan interior ministry has been grossly ineffective in recruiting students for the police academy; few recruits come from the south and east, where the insurgency is strongest, and admission is granted to just about any applicant who can read and meet basic physical standards.

Police training is now being transferred to the NATO training mission. Hundreds of NATO officers are lengthening leadership training, fixing recruitment problems, and increasing instructor quality. Progress will accelerate if and when the U.S. Defense Department finishes taking over police training from the State Department and its lead contractor, Dyncorp, a long-overdue change that has been held up by bureaucratic and legal red tape.

The Afghan National Army is well ahead of the Afghan National Police in officer development. The four-year National Military Academy of Afghanistan solicits applications from every Afghan high school, and admits students from all provinces and ethnic groups based on rigorous testing. Admission is highly competitive—only twenty percent of applicants gain admission. The army's other source of commissioned officers, the Officer Candidate School, also selects on a merit basis from a rich applicant pool. Instructor absenteeism has been far too high at this school, but the problem will soon diminish because the school's commandant was just fired for corruption and ineffectiveness.

The relief of that commandant is an encouraging sign that General McChrystal and other coalition leaders are doing more to help the Afghans weed out weak commanders. Until recently, the United States and its allies spent too little time engaging the Afghans on this issue, and the issue received too little attention from senior Afghan leaders, who are often preoccupied with small matters that subordinates should handle, like the orchestration of tactical operations or the assignment of parking spots. We have to keep exhorting the Afghans to visit subordinates, relieve underperformers, and refrain from micromanagement.

As far as a "bottom-up" approach to counterinsurgency is concerned, comparisons with other conflicts are highly precarious. Iraq's population had fewer tribal and ethnic divisions than Afghanistan's, and most of Vietnam's population had no such divisions. Many inside the Beltway are surprised to hear that the "bottom-up" approach has been tried intermittently in Afghanistan since 2001, and has often failed because the empowerment of one tribe or personality resulted in the oppression of others, turning them into insurgents.

Some participants in the SAIS/Texas Tech conference advocated elections for provincial and district offices, but elections can easily lead to tyranny of the majority in a country where the powerful have so often trampled on the less powerful. Many Afghans have told me that it is better to entrust a province to someone who is not native to that province because natives are likely to promote their own tribes and families at the expense of others, and because the local insurgents can render native leaders passive by threatening their families. The Karzai government, moreover, is unlikely to relinquish its ability to appoint provincial officials. Our best bet is to help the Afghan government appoint the right sorts of leaders at the provincial and district levels, and to assign the right sorts of American leaders, advisers, and intelligence personnel to the provinces and districts. Fruitful co-option of local Afghan elites requires smart leaders who take the time to study tribal dynamics and individual personalities, and who have the social skills and the patience to sit through the protracted meetings and visits required to build personal relationships.

The belief that Vietnam showed the futility of counterinsurgency when the indigenous government lacks legitimacy is contravened by numerous successes in Vietnam and ultimate demise of the Viet Cong. After a poor start in 1960 and 1961, the South Vietnamese counterinsurgency thrived in 1962 and the first ten months of 1963 as a new generation of leaders took charge. This new generation, by the way, took seven years to develop, which should cause us to toss aside plans that envision creating self-sufficient Afghan security forces from scratch in a year or two. The counterinsurgency went into a tailspin after the American-sponsored overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem in November 1963 and the ensuing leadership purges, but recovered after the Tet Offensive of 1968. In the post-Tet period, good South Vietnamese and American commanders provided the leadership required to secure the population and destroy the enemy's forces. It mattered little that the South Vietnamese leaders were chosen by authorities in Saigon or that they oftentimes were not native to their areas, because the Vietnamese peasants—like most rural Afghans—cared mainly about which side was militarily stronger and ran affairs in a more just fashion in their area. By the early 1970s, the Viet Cong insurgency had been annihilated—South Vietnam fell in 1975 because broken American

promises of aid and air support precluded effective defense of the country's huge western flank against a massive North Vietnamese invasion.

The Viet Cong was a better insurgency than the Taliban and the other Afghan insurgencies will ever be. Its sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia were safer than the Taliban's sanctuaries in Pakistan, and it had the assistance of formidable North Vietnamese Army divisions that have no equivalent in Afghanistan. The Afghan insurgents can be defeated as thoroughly as the Viet Cong if the Afghan government and its foreign allies can place superior leaders in the provinces during the coming months and years.

Dr. Mark Moyar is professor of national security affairs at the Marine Corps University and author of A Question of Command: Counterinsurgency from the Civil War to Iraq (2009), Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965 (2006), and Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism in Vietnam (1997, new edition 2007).

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not represent the official position of the U.S. government.