



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

smallwarsjournal.com

Putting the “I” in the COIN Team

Gary Anderson

The German General Staff system had its faults, but as T. N. Dupuy pointed out in his classic study, *A Genius for War*, it produced a system that institutionalized excellence at the tactical and operational levels of war from the defeat of Napoleon to the final moments of World War II. No one who has ever served on or with a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Iraq or Afghanistan is likely to equate PRTs with the Germans who wore the purple stripe on their trousers. However, the Germans had one thing that PRTs could use; that being a shared vision and mission focus.

PRTs are, by nature, interagency bodies. There, we find their potential strength and their shared weakness. Each member of a PRT brings with him or her, the strength of his parent organization as well as its institutional baggage. If the members of the team cannot create a shared vision and shed some of that baggage, the team becomes dysfunctional. PRTs which develop a shared vision and mission focus inevitably will become key elements to the counterinsurgency effort; those that do not, become liabilities. Institutionalizing excellence in PRT performance should become a key goal as we move forward in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Any PRT or embedded PRT (ePRT) has three key individuals representing the organizations that bring critical resources to the counterinsurgency (COIN) fight. The State Department's Foreign Service Officer (FSO) organization provides the team leaders in Iraq, and the Deputies/Political officers in Afghanistan are FSOs. The Department of Defense (DOD) provides deputies in Iraq and team leaders in Afghanistan. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) brings the developmental expertise and access to the foreign assistance money needed for long term success. If these three pistons are not in synch, the team will not function at full capacity. Unfortunately, in many cases, the PRT engine is not running smoothly because the parts do not function as a whole. We need to fix this.

The German General Staff spent years of education and socialization in creating a shared vision and mission focus in creating and refining its system. We cannot afford that investment in terms of time in the wars that we are now fighting, but that may not be necessary. A shared vision is not necessarily a function of time; it can result in a shared understanding of the problem at hand in a relatively short period if the right tools are applied.

Part of the problem is institutional. The military will inevitably bring a security oriented mind set to the problem. Foreign Services Officers come from an “observe and report” culture. USAID officers look at most problems from a long term development standpoint. None of these world

views is ideally postured to confront the challenges of COIN. These call for a hands-on, interdisciplinary approach that includes real-time near term fixes combined with vision for moving to long-term stability over time. These need not be mutually exclusive positions.

The problems usually begin when a key player comes into the battle space with his own preconceived view firmly in place, and probably at odds with those of the other members of the team. Unlike, regimental and brigade combat teams, there is no work-up period to work out the kinks.

That leads me to a humble suggestion. We would benefit from an off-site workshop where the incoming PRT or ePRT leader would meet with the USAID leader and the deputy for a week long work-up period in an offsite location. This should probably be at the embassy, but in any case, it needs to be away from the distractions of the office, and in a location where the players can stand back from the immediate problems of the near-term fight in order to think ahead. This approach should include some strong mentoring and facilitation. It should also be a place where senior embassy and military representatives can give the incoming team leader an assessment of how the team is doing as well as a realistic intelligence assessment of the battle space. I would also recommend a fourth player to the mix. That would be the deputy of the PRT's or ePRT's partner military organization. Commanders' Emergency Response Fund (CERP) money is the 500 pound gorilla in the room when it comes to COIN resourcing, and the deputy usually leads the non-lethal portion of the military effort. Without his or her buy-in the civilian effort will be sub-optimal at best.

The week would give the key leaders time to get to know each other, evaluate where the team is, and craft a campaign plan for the coming year. The plan should be briefed to the key embassy and military leaders to ensure that it conforms to the overall political-military strategy. Once back on station, the new team leader can come aboard confident that he has a game plan that is supported by his key subordinates and addresses the concerns of the military and diplomatic leadership. I would strongly recommend that U.S. Joint Forces Command be tasked with coordinating such an effort. They have an interagency doctrinal charter and the resources to organize and execute such workshops.

It is said that there is no "I" in team, but that is not always true. The interagency "I" should be the silent vowel in any team when it comes to COIN.

Gary Anderson is a retired Marine Corps Colonel. He recently left the State Department after a year-long tour as the Senior Governance Advisor to and embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team in Iraq.

This is a single article excerpt of material published in [Small Wars Journal](#).

Published by and COPYRIGHT © 2010, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license and per our [Terms of Use](#). We are in this together.



No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.

Contact: comment@smallwarsjournal.com

Visit www.smallwarsjournal.com

Cover Price: Your call. [Support SWJ here](#).