



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

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In Marja: Lead, Follow, or Get Out of the Way

Gary Anderson

It never ceases to amaze me how quick we are to lecture our Iraqi and Afghan allies on the importance of good governance and interagency operations while blatantly violating many of those principles ourselves. The latest incident of interagency fratricide played out in the *Washington Post* in an [April 13th article](#) by Rajiv Chandrasekaran regarding attempts by U.S. Marines to use innovative methods to reduce the poppy crop in Marja, Afghanistan. In their attempt to reduce a major source of funding for the Taliban in that region, the Marines fell afoul of “anonymous sources” at the Headquarters of the Helmand Province Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT).

It seems that the Marines have been paying local farmers to plow under their land rather than harvest the lucrative poppy crop. The Marines have also been blocking roads to keep out migrant laborers who are brought in to harvest the crop. The farmers seem relatively happy with this arrangement because many of the migrants are reluctant to enter the Marja area anyway because it is still an active combat zone.

Some PRT members chose to become part of the problem rather than part of the solution by taking their gripes to Chandrasekaran rather than by offering constructive alternatives to the poppy problem which they have been unable to come to grips with on their own for years. Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident. Members of the traditional civilian development community have failed consistently to grasp the basic principles of counterinsurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan for years by adhering to ideas more suited to development work in Togo or Chile than in war zones such as Afghanistan and Iraq.

The main complaint of the civilians on the PRT seems to be that the Taliban will levy a tax on the farmers who accept the buy-out and create disequilibrium with other farmers in the province who are not getting the stipend to plow the illegal crops under. The PRT civilians also complain that this rewards bad behavior. I repeatedly heard these kinds of bankrupt ideas from traditional development community members in Iraq while serving with a PRT. These are the same kind of development officials who pay corrupt local non-governmental organizations to do developmental projects that have nothing to do with counterinsurgency. Worse, these organizations pay protection money to the Taliban to stay in operation.

The PRT has ignored several options that might actually contribute to progress rather than getting in the way. First, it might fund cheap rental farm equipment to farmers in the entire province provided that they plant legitimate crops. This would cut down on the high cost of

migrant laborers and make the local farmers' legitimate crops more competitive against foreign state subsidized imports coming in from neighboring countries, particularly Iran.

The PRT could also fund local mobile cooperative banks which would allow the Marines to put the farmer's money directly into interest bearing accounts. The farmers then could argue that they have no cash for Taliban tax collectors while drawing interest and having collateral for loans to buy seed for legitimate crops. The lack of a banking system by which farmers could fund seeds for non-poppy cash crops has been the single greatest cause of the growth of the drug trade in Afghanistan since the American invasion. The fact that the PRT has not figured that out in all of these years is its problem, not that of the Marines.

The real problem is that programs of the traditional development community have caused many of the reconstruction failures in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Too many of the traditional development community mafia comes out of the Peace Corps rather than the Marine Corps. Many wear their anti-military credentials like badges of honor, and are blissfully ignorant of counterinsurgency theory or practice.

For once, the majority of the American interagency community is in lockstep in Marja. The State and Defense Departments worked closely with the Drug Enforcement Agency to put together the effort to get control of the poppy situation. The Helmand PRT is supposed to be the civilian interagency leader in that province. It has dropped the ball. The PRT civilians should adhere to the old adage; lead, follow, or get out of the way.

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

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