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## No, Really: Is the US Military Cut Out For Courageous Restraint?

by Jason Lemieux

General (GEN) Stanley McChrystal's recent dismissal has spurred a host of articles that quote US troops complaining about his controversial rules of engagement (ROEs) directives in Afghanistan. The reasoning underlying these complaints usually shows a lack of understanding of counterinsurgency doctrine, an unwillingness to accept its logic, or both. The stubborn refusal of many servicemembers to accept McChrystal's "courageous restraint" directive calls into question our military's suitability for population-centric counterinsurgency.

By now, the reasoning behind the restrictive ROEs is well known: Insurgents depend on support from the civilian inhabitants (whether the distinction between insurgents and "civilian inhabitants" is always meaningful is another question) of their theater of operations. GEN McChrystal termed it "[Insurgent Math](#)": Every time you kill an innocent person, you create ten new insurgents. GEN McChrystal further elaborated that, "Destroying a home or property jeopardizes the livelihood of an entire family and creates more insurgents."

In a June 23, 2010 radio bit titled, "Troops Surprised About Gen. McChrystal's Ouster," NPR correspondent Tom Bowman [told his colleague](#) that, "Now, clearly, you know, [the troops] don't want to kill innocent civilians, but they believe their hands are tied in going after the Taliban." It's certainly true that a portion of the troops, perhaps the majority, have no desire to kill innocent civilians. What America is not being honest with itself about, however, is that a significant minority don't really care how many civilians are killed as long as they are allowed to do what they imagine to be their jobs:

- "[He should be fired.](#)" said a 23-year-old specialist who recently completed a deployment in Afghanistan. "Today's rules of engagement in Afghanistan is a Taliban weapon that is commonly used against American forces" (WaPo, June 24).
- "[We have all of these stupid rules](#) that in the end wind up hurting more people. I mean, hesitation can mean death out here," said a soldier serving in the South (Time, July 7).
- Complaining in the infamous [Rolling Stone article](#) that the ROEs defeated the purpose of his deployment to Afghanistan, PFC Jared Pautsch opined, "We should just drop a \*\*\*ing bomb on this place. You sit and ask yourself: What are we doing here?"

A lot of Americans sympathize with the troops on issues like shootings at vehicle checkpoints (escalations of force [EOFs], in euphemistic military parlance) in which a civilian vehicle is engaged after a servicemember, in a "split second decision," perceives the vehicle to be a threat. Frankly, much of this sympathy is overblown. In most of the EOFs that I witnessed in Iraq from

2003-2006, I could not identify any behavior that was threatening or even unusual for a vehicle in an urban area. Often, the only act that triggered the engagement of a civilian vehicle was the crossing of an imaginary line that, even when marked, couldn't possibly have held the same significance for the driver that it did for the Marine shooting him. I found that a considerable number of Marines were simply unwilling or unable to see things from the civilian's perspective despite [being able](#) to rattle off General Mattis' 5-3-5 (which include "First, do no harm" and "Iraqis are not our enemy, but our enemy hides amongst them") without hesitation. GEN McChrystal confirmed that this hadn't changed as of early 2010 when, during a virtual town hall meeting with troops in Afghanistan, he said, "To my knowledge, in the nine-plus months I've been here, [not a single case](#) where we have engaged in an escalation of force incident and hurt someone has it turned out that the vehicle had a suicide bomb or weapons in it and, in many cases, had families in it." In fairness, McChrystal also acknowledged that his ROEs were sometimes bastardized in the bureaucratic route from his pen to a card in a combat armsman's hip pocket.

Some might say that no one ever said the troops had to agree with the doctrine or should be held responsible for conditions that were essentially brought about by policy decisions. True as this is, the widely accepted narrative is that because of their honor and bravery, the troops are exercising restraint, protecting civilians, and have unimpeachable discipline such that any ROE given to them will be obeyed without question. This assumption, and the limits of imposed discipline generally, clearly need a closer look. Psychologists Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo showed decades ago in separate experiments that ordinary people readily [rationalize](#) harming innocents, and a full third of them may even [take pleasure](#) in it, when a higher authority takes responsibility for the human cost. No individual factor (e.g., economic class or parental upbringing) accounted for by Milgram or Zimbardo was able to predict this behavior in subjects yet, astoundingly, their findings remain absent as caveats to "honor" and "bravery" in the discourse on military restraint.

A compounding factor rarely addressed by, well, anyone at all, is that servicemembers who kill civilians, whether intentionally or accidentally, [will usually escape legal scrutiny](#). This is partly inherent in the decentralized nature of counterinsurgency – commanders cannot be everywhere at once. It's virtually impossible to fact-check or even identify a falsified patrol report unless relatives of the victims approach US forces and accept all the accompanying complications, from risking yet another EOF to insurgent retaliation to US forces' disbelief. Suffice it to say that I have firsthand knowledge of the regularity with which cover-ups and their many rationalizations can occur below the platoon level. Ask yourself: What's to stop them?

There are many reasons why US troops have such a hard time accepting the wisdom of strict ROEs. It's not that they are uniquely bad or undisciplined. One factor, perhaps the most important, is common to all highly functional militaries: Primary group cohesion, otherwise known as "brotherhood." By the time a combat arms unit deploys to Afghanistan, its members have spent months of hardship in training during which they've forged deep interpersonal bonds.<sup>1</sup> Their desire to protect each other is often valued over (or fallaciously equated with) accomplishment of the counterinsurgency mission:

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<sup>1</sup> For an outstanding illustration of this camaraderie in action, see William Manchester's quote in Lawrence LeShan's [The Psychology of War](#), Helios 2002, p. 97.

Marines [in Marjah] had intelligence that insurgents intended to target approaching U.S. forces with 50-gallon drums filled with homemade explosives and metal fragments. But when officers at the command asked for permission to strike from the regional command in Kandahar, they were rejected...The Marines proposed targeting the drums at an angle to avoid damaging the house in case, as one officer noted, "they contained baby milk." Again they were denied. Finally, as the sun rose, a Marine unit began approaching the compound. *The frustrated officer, fearful that a detonation would kill the troops, [declared the target a case of self-defense](#). No longer was he required to seek permission.* Three Hellfire missiles were launched at the drums, igniting them into a huge fireball, indicating that they were filled with explosives. *"You can't fight a war like this," the officer growled [emphasis added] (WaPo, July 9).*

To make matters worse, recruit training in the Army and Marine Corps is purposefully designed to inculcate an unqualified desire in soldiers and Marines to violate powerful psychological and cultural taboos on killing. I don't argue that boot camp should stop training soldiers to kill, but I do assert that conditioning humans to kill fundamentally changes their psyche in ways that cannot be switched off like a light switch when the time comes to perform counterinsurgency. Besides, some recruits join the military specifically *because* they want to kill people, even if that's not the reason they give their families.

Another reason, for which I have less direct proof but which seems nevertheless apparent, is that US culture is generally very individualistic. Like all militaries, the US military strives to foster a strongly collective orientation. It can't be denied, though, that recruiting and incentives have been tailored to an individualistic population. The late Army of One campaign is the most obvious example. The Post 9/11 GI Bill, which offers the prospect of a full ride in college at the expense of a yet undetermined generation of taxpayers, is another. Self-denying ROEs are a major source of cognitive dissonance for the individually minded:

"If we allow soldiers to die in Afghanistan at the hands of a leader who says, 'We're going to protect civilians rather than soldiers,' what's going to happen on the ground?" [said a junior Army officer](#) in southern Afghanistan. "The soldiers are not going to execute the mission to the best of their ability. They won't put their hearts into the mission. That's the kind of atmosphere we're building" (WaPo, July 9).

There are, of course, some servicemembers who *do* get courageous restraint:

"The guys down here get emotional because friends get hurt, and we see bad guys every day," [said LTC Johnny Davis](#), commander of the 1st Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team of the 101st Airborne Division. "What you want to do is be patient. It doesn't have to be right now. If he is not a threat to you or not giving you effective fire, separate him from the people...Just yesterday we captured a three-man team, with the jugs, the command wire. So, that's how you do it. And you have to be patient, and take them out one cell at a time" (NPR, July 1).

Nevertheless, this key tenet of counterinsurgency has not been internalized across the rank and file, even after all of our setbacks in Iraq, Afghanistan *and* Vietnam. It seems mighty unlikely that true understanding of courageous restraint will suddenly sink in anytime soon. If the mission is to go on unchanged, our military leadership needs to answer several lingering questions:

- If we take Insurgent Math as a given, and even one soldier out of ten finds his way around the ROEs, will the other nine soldiers have a chance to destroy or neutralize more insurgents than he creates?
- How should Afghans weigh the chance of being killed by us against the probability of enjoying a stable country when we're through?
- At what moral cost comes the eventual outcome of the war? If we take as a given the shaky assumption that the Afghanistan campaign prevents terrorist attacks on US soil, are American lives worth more than Afghan lives?

Nor would institutionalizing restraint guarantee our success. McChrystal himself acknowledged that counterinsurgency is "easy to lose," and locals can be annoyingly finicky when it comes to foreign occupations. What's harder for many people to accept is that escalating force in a people's war ultimately makes victory less likely, not more. The need for strict ROEs is "unfair" in the sense that heeding it will not necessarily endear the locals but dismissing it will probably convince them to support the insurgency. For example, the French in Algeria learned that victory derived from brutally wiping out the FLN was painfully short-lived. As an important mentor once related to me, "The French defeated the insurgency the first three times. It was the fourth time that was a problem." In fact, RAND just released a [study](#) adding to the mountain of evidence that "repression wins phases, but usually not cases" of counterinsurgency in the last 30 years. Of course, force ceases to be futile at the genocidal level.

Unfortunately for guys like PFC Pautsch, the US simply does not have enough at stake in Afghanistan to lower itself to just dropping a \*\*\*\*king bomb on the place. Standing by our values is more important even if, yes, we lose the war. It is imperative that military leaders are forthcoming with their civilian leadership (prerequisite is being forthcoming with themselves) about prospects for US success in the current iteration of counterinsurgency versus other options like Columbia Professor Austin Long's [counterterrorism proposal](#); to do otherwise is reckless and irresponsible. For the American citizenship, being that we are the United States and not the terrorists we claim to be protecting ourselves from, it is time to take an honest look at whether our military is cut out for what it has been asked to do in Afghanistan.

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