SMALL WARS JOURNAL

smallwarsjournal.com

The Closers (Part 2): Civilians in the Clear Phase of a Counterinsurgency

Gary Anderson

"Get out of my yard! I don't care if you have an entire division of soldiers with you. You have invaded my country and destroyed Zaidon. I want you out now!"

Farmer Jamail
In our first encounter, April 2009

The transition from a primarily military effort to one of host nation civilian leadership in any insurgent conflict that Americans become involved in is a delicate process in which American civilians should play a central role. If a counterinsurgency is done properly, the seeds of the end should be sewn at the beginning. This was the case in El Salvador, but not in Iraq or Afghanistan. In Asia, we had to learn the hard way.

Clear, hold, and build is the mantra of counterinsurgency operations as American doctrine defines them. FM 3-24 (*Counterinsurgency*) is now officially considered interagency, not just military doctrine; it is an accepted interagency approach, and I believe in it. I've seen it work first hand in two distinctly different parts of Iraq and in recent months we seem to be finally making it work in Afghanistan if the research I have done for this study is correct; but it is not a slam dunk.

If improperly applied, it won't work at all. As with politics, all insurgencies are local. If the local population is hard core anti-American or anti-government for whatever reason, it will be difficult to wean them to the government side. This usually happens when the government is made up of an ethnic or religious group that has traditional animosity to the local population; these situations are relatively rare, but they happen. In such cases, the second method of ending an insurgency (ruthless local suppression) may be the host nation government's final recourse. That should be their decision, not ours. Fortunately, these situations are generally the exception in insurgencies. The normal case is one in which the population is on the fence. The general population base is usually open to persuasion, but it is also open to intimidation if the population is not protected from the insurgents. In most revolutions, the majority of the population is on the sidelines, if not the fence; this was particularly true of the American Revolution.

It took us along time to realize this in both Iraq and Afghanistan where we played the "whack a mole" game of counter-terrorism (CT) for a long time before we decided that we could not kill our way out of the situation. Counter-terrorism has its place. The hardest of the hard core cadres of the insurgents have to be either marginalized or isolated from the population by targeting strikes based on good intelligence. However, there are limits. When anyone who has ever toted a gun for the insurgents or carried out an errand is targeted for killing or arrest, we begin making more insurgents to replace them; this is particularly true in a part of the world where revenge is considered to be a matter of honor. There is a place for CT, but when it becomes the primary strategy, it drifts into the second manner of ending an insurgency, and the American electorate has a low tolerance for this type of approach. When we adopt such a strategy, we need to be fairly sure that the American public is ready to "take it to the limit" in the long run. Suppression is a high risk course of action.

The clear-hold-build approach obviously starts with the clearing phase in any given area, and again, this is a local matter. Different areas of the nation will be in different phases at any given time. There is a common misperception that the civilian role starts in the build phase; this is not true. The clear phase is time when the civilian portion of the American effort should start sowing the seeds for reconstruction that will begin in the hold phase and continue into the build portion. Whenever, the U.S. force moves into the area, a forward element of the designated Reconstruction Team (RT) should accompany it.

I will digress here for a moment to discuss terminology. I use the term RT rather than Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) to describe operational and tactical level civilian involvement because, in the future we may operate in areas where there aren't provinces. I choose RT as a generic term. I avoid extensive use of acronyms where possible, but I use this for brevity.

When our partner U.S. Army Brigade Combat Team was assigned to clear the Abu Ghraib district, I convinced our embedded PRT (ePRT) leader to form an assessment team to explore the new area. The team had two primary missions. The first was to assess the situation and prioritize what needed to be done in the hold and build phases. The teams had no fixed table of organization; however there was a preferred mix of skills. The second mission was to make the initial contacts that could be built on in the future. I'll use our Assessment Team's experience in Abu Ghraib as an example, but this is only an example; it is not meant to be a template.

Our team had a governance advisor (in our case me) to determine what state of governance existed. In areas that have been dominated by insurgents, it may not exist at all or may have been holed up in government controlled compounds with little or no contact with the day to day life of the area; this was the case in Abu Ghraib. In other cases, the government officials may have cooperated with the insurgents to survive. If you go into such situations with the attitude that anyone who cooperated with the insurgents is marked for life and not worthy of engagement, you will be a very lonely person.

Some hard core anti-insurgents who fled will return and volunteer to help. This can be useful, but you need to be sensitive to the fact that they may be resented by some who chose to stick it out. You need to be mindful to the fact that some reconciliation and rejection is going on around you and you may hear both sides of the story.

As areas are cleared the civilian governance advisors can encourage the host nation government to resume services that were disrupted by insurgent occupation. These services will likely need to operate out of a secure compound with military escort initially, but it is a sign that things are getting better. This can be accompanied by a clear media message that government forces backed up by whatever coalition forces are supporting them are here to stay. The locals may not believe it at first, but the delivery of some services is a signal that things will gradually improve.

Perception management is important here. It is vital that the civilian population not be misled as to the difficulty of the task or the length of time it may take to be successful; but the message to the population should be that things will improve steadily, ***if they help***. Here, it is important that the RT and military messages be in synch. To the extent possible, it is helpful to get the host nation media aboard; this is often easier said than done.

The assessment team should also include business and agricultural expertise. To determine what needs to be done to get those sectors up and running. This expertise can be in short supply. When our ePRT moved into Abu Ghraib, we had no agriculture advisor as we had been configured originally as an urban team. When we moved into largely rural Abu Ghraib, it took the manpower system some time to reconfigure us. In the interim, we had to make do with some local contract hires and expertise from the local agricultural college as well as applying some careful listening skills on the part of the team members.

It is important to assess the state of both business and agriculture; the relative importance of each will depend on the area's composition. There is no substitute for talking to people in either case. Again, this has two components. It gains knowledge, but it also begins the process on relationships that can be built on in the future. It is important to quickly understand if there are institutional host nation policies that are inhibiting either business or agriculture. There is nothing that the RT can do about these at its level, but its reporting can help the embassy to point these problems out to the host nation government and allow the issue to be worked from the top down.

A fourth key element is civil society. Civic organizations are the cornerstone of a healthy society, and they are usually under attack from both sides in an insurgency. Groups as diverse as labor unions, political clubs, Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs), media outlets, and other charitable organizations are usually suppressed by autocratic governments that set the conditions for an insurgency in the first place. The suppression of legitimate opposition groups was the spark that set off the popular uprising in Egypt that is ongoing as this is being written.

At the other end of the spectrum, the insurgents will try to co-opt or take over such groups as fronts in the first stage of a prolonged insurgency or take them over outright once they have gained control of a given area in the second stage.

By the time U.S. or coalition troops along with host nation security forces retake control of a given area; such non-governmental organizations that still exist are likely discredited. By the time we got to Abu Ghraib in early 2009, they were virtually non- existent. The host nation government's first inclination will be to ban co-opted non governmental entities outright, and the

assessment team and coalition military should discourage that impulse. It is better to build on an existing institution than to start from scratch. We found that out the hard way with the Iraqi Army.

Re-building civil society is a U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) specialty, and a representative from that agency should be on the Assessment Team. As security improves, USAID will encourage and fund NGOs to partner with local nongovernmental agencies to mentor and fund those organizations and get them back on track as well as establishing new organizations, but during the assessment phase, salvaging any existing mechanisms is the key task. USAID does many things beyond civil society work, but they work through NGO implementers which are contracted by USAID. The assessment is the place where they can start deciding which NGOs are needed. It is important to do this early because the contracting process does not work overnight.

The key output of the assessment should be to establish a credible base line against which to measure future progress. For a nation so steeped in science and technology, we have done an amazingly poor job of establishing measures of effectiveness for counterinsurgency, nation building, stability operations, and foreign aid in general. The inability to do so is behind much of the difficulty that the State Department and USAID are having in justifying their budgets to the current Congress.

Stated simply, measures of effectiveness (MOE) answer the question, "better than what?" Without a good baseline, that question cannot be answered, and we are left with measuring input rather than output. This became a scandal in Vietnam where measures often degenerated into reports of bombs dropped, money spent on reconstruction, and ultimately, the infamous body count. It is the classic mistake of mistaking effort for work.

Perhaps the most notable Vietnam example is a district touted as being a model by the South Vietnamese government because there had been no Viet Cong assassinations of local officials for many months. When American finally visited the area, he found out why; they were all dead or fled.

In Iraq and Afghanistan General David Petraeus has done a good job of addressing the Measures of Effectiveness problem. His famous Power Point briefings are a solid baseline. He has done this since his earliest days as a division commander in Northern Iraq in 2003-4. Elsewhere we wasted years by largely measuring effort rather than results.

A good assessment should take a number of converging paths. Hiring civilians to do surveys in areas that have been cleared enough to do so is one way, but it has limitations as does hiring civilians to covertly measure public opinion by listening to coffee house conversations and mosque/church sermons. But this is only one data point.

The RT should also closely partner with the military sponsored Human Terrain Teams (HTT) in their area of operations. These teams are tasked with mapping local social networks to include tribes, political groups, and business networks (legal and illegal). Sharing of information will benefit both. Another resource the assessment team should tap into, are the Civil Affairs Teams

(CATs) that operated with Army and Marine Corps Brigade and Regimental Combat Teams. The CATs are generally assigned very specific things to look at on any given mission, but if they are looking at one thing, it frees you to look at other things. The Assessment Team is well advised to coordinate with the Civil Affairs Cell of the commands they are working with to avoid duplication of effort and maximize scarce resources.

However, there is no substitute for getting out and meeting the people and continually monitoring their attitudes. In doing so, we need to be leery of depending on Key Leader Engagements ("KLE" is the military acronym) alone to gauge the mood of the population and conditions. KLE are meetings with government officials as well as tribal and religious leaders.

While KLEs are necessary and must be done to engage with the governing bodies, both formal and informal, they have several draw backs. First, in the case of governing officials at the local level, they have probably been cloistered in their compounds during the period when the insurgents held sway. We would not be clearing the area otherwise; some will likely have collaborated with the insurgents, if for no other reason than to stay alive and protect their families. In the first instance, they probably won't really know what is going on in the community; in the second, you will get a skewed story. Even in the best of times, in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, there is not a tradition of public servants being responsive to the people. That is probably a big reason why there was a revolution in the first place. Again, Egypt is an example.

Government officials, Sheikhs, village elders, and religious leaders will want to portray themselves in the best possible light and gloss over problems unless it is in their interest. This is human nature. This is why good military leaders have a habit of talking to individual soldiers and not solely relying on reports from subordinate commanders to gauge morale in their units.

There is no substitute for getting a solid representative sampling of both attitude and of conditions from the population. This is not easy, particularly in the beginning. The exchange between me and Farmer Jamail that began this discussion was not typical, but it was emblematic of the problem of breaking the ice. Jamail lives in the Zaidon region of the Abu Ghraib district (Qa'da). It was a traditional hot spot of Sunni rebellion. It, along with the neighboring town of Nasr Wa Salaam, provided the collective cradle of the 1921 revolt against the British.

Jamail was a reasonably prosperous farmer who had served in the Army in the Iran-Iraq War. He had no arguments with Saddam or the Baathists and believed that the Baath Party had lifted the nation from third to second world status, although he was later prone to admit that Saddam had neglected the infrastructure in pursuit of military adventures that Jamail did not understand.

He deeply resented what he saw as the unjustified American conquest of Iraq, and regarded the Shiia dominated government as American puppets, although he later claimed that he believed they had sold themselves to Iran.

The Americans had been through the Zaidon area on several operations to clear the area of Al Qaeda in Iraq. In one sweep, the Marines blew down the door of his house in a raid injuring his son and causing some brain damage to his daughter. We eventually dealt with that, but his

resentment was very great. On the day we met, he told me that the only time he had cried in his entire adult life was the day Baghdad fell to the American advance.

Worse than that, every time the Americans swept through, they made promises that they didn't follow up on. In one sweep, the local Al Qaeda in Iraq unit made a last stand in the local military facility. This was the center of the dairy industry in a dairy region. Some say the Al Qaeda blew up the facility, others say the Marines hit it with a 500 pound bomb. At any rate the dairy industry was ruined. Zaidon Market, the town center was a mess with roads pock marked by IEDs and neglect by the Baghdad government during Saddam's never ending series of wars. The canal system was also decaying and water theft by rich Sheikh's was rampant. Garbage was everywhere as the village of Zaidon Market was not served by the local sanitation authority.

Jamail's cynicism and hostility was shared, somewhat less vocally, by the population; but hostility and mistrust was palpable in the air on our assessment visit. I told Jamail that day that we were here to stay, and that, if he would help, we would bring Zaidon back to life. His reply was, "that's what they all say; I'll believe it when I see it." Based on what I had heard and seen, I couldn't fault him. When I left, I said; I'll be back… a lot".

In my mind, Jamail's attitude would be the baseline against which I would measure progress in Zaidon. We will return to Jamail and Zaidon later in this series.

One of the most difficult parts of a population assessment is getting access. During this and later portions of the operation, we needed the protection of a Personnel Security Detail (PSD). In our case, our embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team was partnered with an army brigade and their Military Police Platoon provided a column of armored vehicles and fifteen soldiers - all armed to the teeth. It is hard to just "drop in" for a friendly chat with fifteen of "your closest and most heavily armed friends". It was absolutely necessary, and there were times when their presence saved our lives. However, it obviously complicates the "winning of hearts and minds", a phrase that I hate anyway.

Convincing our PSD that random stops to chat was a good idea, was a challenge. In my case, being a retired Marine with a couple of wars under my belt didn't hurt. Army SOP is to thoroughly study any planned route days in advance, recon it by air, and gather any known threat intelligence in advance. I never asked them to deviate from the route, but I did want to stop when I saw something interesting. They didn't like this at first, but came to see my logic. Professional terrorists, like professional criminals, are not spontaneous. They like their victims to have routines. We were careful to plot varying patrol routes for each survey patrol. Spontaneity on our part within those routes was not dangerous unless we serendipitously came upon a terrorist cell doing something else; this only happened once, and the soldiers did not mind that at all. They eventually saw the logic, and also saw the intelligence gathering value of actually talking to people. Exploring the countryside was preferable to them than guarding us at the many meetings with governance officials which was also a part of my job.

There should be a woman and a female interpreter on any Assessment Team. Women are a vital part of any community, but it is impossible for western men or any man outside of the family to

interact with them in the conservative Muslim societies of Iraq and Afghanistan. The Marines in Afghanistan have done a good job of creating special all female units for this purpose.

One note is in order here. During the clear and hold phases, the military will do a lot of small, quick impact projects. Civilian development experts are often dismissive of such efforts as superficial and unsustainable. In this, they miss the point. These efforts are the first step in what the military calls "non lethal terrain denial". A repaired pothole here and a school improvement there are the beginning of trying to convince the population that an American/coalition presence may not be such a bad thing. It has force protection implications as well as beginning the relationships that eventually lead to intelligence gathering. This only works if the unit intends to stay in the area. Random, drive by, acts of kindness are useless. Serious reconstruction should be civilian business or a civil-military partnership, but we need to remember to let the soldiers be soldiers, or Marines, if that be the case. They are preparing the ground for your work.

If a solid baseline can be established for future reconstruction efforts during the clearing phase, the RT will have a strong foundation on which to build in future phases.

The Closers (Part 1): How Insurgencies End can be found here.

Gary Anderson is a retired Marine Corps Colonel who served as a Special Advisor to the Deputy Secretary of Defense on Counterinsurgency from 2003-05. He served on an embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team in Iraq in 2009-10, and is currently an Adjunct Professor at the George Washington University Elliott School of International Relations.