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The Philosophy Behind the Iraq Surge: An Interview with General Jack Keane

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How would you describe the US Army's mind-set in approaching the war in Vietnam?

I think we took an army whose primary focus was conventional operations against the Warsaw Pact in Europe and took it to war in South Vietnam. In the first three years of the war we were trying to use conventional tactics against an unconventional enemy. That strategy failed miserably. And it was not until General Abrams came in and took over from General Westmoreland who changed the strategy to a counterinsurgency strategy which was designed to protect the population. We saw significant progress against the insurgency and then, by 1971, three years later, it was essentially defeated.

Should we understand that World War II, the Korean War, and preparation for Fulda Gap campaigns - all this operational heritage - had an impact in shaping the mind-set of the US Military vis-à-vis executing war?

Yes.

What should have been the lessons learned from the Vietnam experience?

I think we learned all the right lessons in how to defeat an insurgency because we succeeded. We lost the war for other reasons, but in terms of defeating the insurgency, I think we learned the right lessons in terms of the preeminence of and the importance of protecting the population, winning the population to your side, using minimum amount of force, dealing with a government that is not effective and dealing with a population that has legitimate grievances against that government. Most insurgencies obviously have some legitimate grievances against the government – otherwise - it wouldn't be an insurgency to begin with. I think we codified the major tenets of the counterinsurgency we learned and it was in our memory up until 1975. When the war ended we purged it from our lexicon and put the doctrine we had developed on the shelf and embraced war against the Warsaw Pact and Soviet Union. I think it has much to do with how the war ended in Vietnam. The fact that it did not come out favorably to us-I think the military leaders of the time just wanted to get rid of it like a cancer. So we stopped educating our officers about counterinsurgency; irregular warfare never became part of our doctrine, or part of our training through the rest of the '70s and well into the '80s. In 1988 we started the Joint Readiness Training Center which became the fountainhead for training our light forces (airborne, infantry, ranger and SOF) in a complex battlefield which had irregular warfare as its center piece.

Unfortunately the heavy force Army was never exposed to such a training experience. In 2003 in Iraq, we put on the battlefield a conventional army, well trained for big wars, but ill prepared for irregular warfare. So the commanders started off executing what they were trained to do, using conventional tactics against an unconventional enemy. They were not educated and trained to conduct a counterinsurgency.

It is said that you were the Godfather of the “Surge”. What was the rationale behind the Iraq surge?

The US military started to understand that the things were not right in Iraq by 2004. From 2003 the level of violence increased every year, 2004 over 2003, 2005 over 2004 and then a catastrophic increase in 2006 - so much so that the newly formed Maliki government had become disconnected from its people as result of the Samarra Mosque bombing. The Sunni insurgents and the AQ tried for years to provoke the Shias so that their militias would come out on the offensive and not stay in the defense. Time and time again they provoked, but the Shias would not take the bait - except for some actions in the south during 2004. But the Samara Mosque bombing was a game-changer. The Sunni insurgents and the AQ leadership finally got what they wanted. Then they had Shias killing Sunni and Sunnis killing Shias. It was a blood bath in Bagdad - there were 100 people a week being killed, Iraq was a fractured state and heading toward becoming a failed state. Many people recognized our Iraq strategy was fundamentally flawed. In my mind it was a short war strategy designed to stand up a political apparatus as quickly as possible. The part of that strategy was to train the Iraqi security forces and transition to them as quickly as possible so we could get out of Iraq before the American people lost their will and their support for the war. I think that was the Abizaid strategy that Casey was executing and Secretary Rumsfeld and the President agreed to. The problem with it was that nowhere in that strategy was there the mission to defeat the insurgency. We were not doing that. We were transitioning to the Iraqis and someday they would defeat it. That was the plan. We did not really state it that way, but that's what was going on. Many of us knew the strategy was totally inappropriate and we had to defeat the insurgency. And that led to convincing the administration that the strategy was failing and that we needed to explore a new strategy - a counterinsurgency strategy. The centerpiece of that strategy was to protect the population - something we were not doing at the time. The Iraqi security forces could not and the US made a conscious decision not to. We had to bring the level of violence down over those two years (2007 and 2008) so it would be within Iraqi capabilities to finally protect the people themselves. The simple fact that no one was protecting or controlling the population had exposed it to AQ, to the Sunni insurgents and Shia militias that took advantage of it. So we had to come out from the Forward Operating Bases and live among population at the platoon level and protect the population day and night. The issue we had in Iraq was the enemy safe havens, support zones and operating areas were all among the population. They used the population to hide, they used the population to store their ammunition and supplies, they lived among the population and their operating area was the population. There was a realization in Iraq among certain leaders, in the Army, in the Marine Corp, and at Fort Leavenworth, among some retired guys like me that the strategy we had was failing and we needed a strategy that could work. But in terms of counterinsurgency itself, and the Army adopting it as a doctrine, I think that as long as our adversaries are using that form of warfare you need to be highly capable of executing it as we are doing now in Afghanistan, where we finally are starting to succeed.

What is winning in a war amongst the people?

In most cases it is a stable secure environment where the host country security forces can deal with the level of violence that remains and a government that is capable of providing essential and effective services to its people. That is the best we can expect. We may not even achieve the last part of it. We can start to exit, as we did in Iraq, before we have a government that has a full capacity and is capable of providing essential services to its entire population. We do not have to stay there with significant military forces to assist that government to achieve those ends. But we have to stay with significant military forces as long as it takes to get the situation stable and secure enough that the host country military can take over and deal with what remains of the insurgency. We did it in Iraq successfully, I believe in Afghanistan we will bring the level of violence down to a level that the Afghan national security forces can deal with it. Essentially you are defeating the insurgency in the sense they can no longer challenge the legitimacy of the regime. You don't have need a flag to be raised on the capital city, you don't have a big parade, but you have driven the enemy forces out of whatever territory they were occupying or whatever influence they had on the people in contested areas. The ending is much more ambiguous and judgment has to be used in regards to the right time to transition. The enemy in most cases is just going to fade away. It is not going to surrender or sign a peace treaty - it is just going to fade away - or recommit to the political process as in Iraq where former adversaries are now part of the political system. Yes, we still have Al Qaeda in Iraq and episodic bombings, but that is certainly within the capacity of the Iraqis to handle. You have to be comfortable with the ambiguity of the ending.

In a meeting with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, before the surge, you recommended he read David Galula. Why Galula?

I think he understood counterinsurgency very well and he also understood an urban insurgency and how to deal with it and how essential protecting the population was as the main effort in an urban insurgency. He is concise and I thought he would be a good primer for the Secretary of Defense to read and provide him with a background on what I was trying to express to him - why the strategy needed to be changed to a counterinsurgency strategy, why protecting the population had to be the main effort, how to operationalize that strategy so we could achieve that end.

“You can't kill your way out to victory” became the hallmark of a military organization reinvented during the Iraqi surge. Does this mean that today the US Military has succeeded in overcoming its Jominian tendency of being enemy oriented and becoming more comfortable in executing civil-mil comprehensive approaches and whole of government COIN operations? Yes it is true that in COIN operations the center of gravity is not the enemy, it's the people and all combat operations must be executed through the prism of what is the impact on the people. However, it does not mean that, at times, combat operations are not very offensive oriented, aggressively executed and highly lethal. In Afghanistan last year ISAF delivered a stunning defeat to the Taliban in Kandahar and Helmand province, so much so, that the gains are not reversible. The campaign was about taking the fight to enemy safe havens and support zones which were not in heavily populated areas. It was tough, foot infantry, close battle operations with combined arms (artillery, mortars, air) in support.

General Jack Keane is a Senior Partner at SCP Partners. A four-star general, he completed 37 years of public service in December 2003, culminating as acting Chief of Staff and Vice Chief of Staff of the US Army.

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