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Evolving the COIN Field Manual: A Case for Reform

by Carl Prine, Crispin Burke, and Michael Few

Nearly a decade removed from 9/11, United States military forces remain entrenched in small wars around the globe. For the foreseeable future, the United States Government (USG) will continue to intervene in varying scale and scope in order to promote democracy and capitalism abroad. While many made efforts to describe small wars and methods of coping with them, our field manuals have not kept up with the wealth of knowledge and wisdom learned on the ground.

In order to prepare for the future, we must first understand where we have been moving beyond individual articles of best practices and lessons learned. The intent of this essay is to provide the critique in order to promote an evolution in our thinking. The purpose is to better prepare those who will follow in our footsteps. Finally, we believe that this reform is a duty required from those who directly observed the costs of today's small wars.

1. FM 3-24 must be rewritten. It has been superseded by other manuals, including SFA (FM 3-07.1), Stability (FM 3-07) and Design (FM 5-0). More weight should be given in the new work to lessons learned during the past 10 years of war. These include, but are not limited to, analyzing how criminality and competition by fratricidal militias, feral criminal syndicates and host nation officials for resources shape the irregular battlefield; the complexity of communal conflicts; tips on reconciliation, amnesty and reintegration of guerrillas and bandits; the role theology and deterritorialized foreign fighters play in a revolt; more up to date notions on the training and equipping of foreign forces; and the nettlesome problem of insurgent safe havens.

2. There is much that is worthwhile, important and lasting in FM 3-24. While the strongest section is that on "intelligence," other pieces within the manual remain relevant for the COIN practitioner such as those on logistics, ethics and air power. Nevertheless, much of the work belongs to another age of revolution and over the past ten years best lessons learned in Iraq, Afghanistan and other conflicts must be reconsidered and adapted for doctrine.

3. Everyone's perceptions of "COIN" are bounded by personal experiences and institutional prejudices. A frank and transparent discussion by professionals should not only guide the rewriting of FM 3-24 but compel a larger discussion about the strategic goals and likelihood of their success in the conflicts we wage overseas. The process should be undertaken with humility and draw upon a wide range of perspectives inside and outside the military and U.S. government. The drafting of a new manual should draw a wide net and include practitioners from Special Operations Command, the U.S. Department of State and the intelligence agencies. Not only will these voices create better doctrinal advice, but they will own more of the process and goals of the doctrine that is confected. Academia should help to provide an interdisciplinary approach, an open-tent of broad lenses, methodologies and frameworks.

4. The new manual should incorporate the experiences of a generation of officers and non-commissioned officers who have spent the bulk of their careers fighting in Iraq and

Afghanistan. Best practices learned at the most junior levels of the military have not been absorbed well by the institution or have been mischaracterized for political or bureaucratic purposes. While the field manual often hints at the bottom-up activism of guerrilla operations, there is little attention paid to adapting the U.S. military and civilian agencies in the same sort of flattened, highly effective and nimble ways in response -- except in the Special Forces. Consideration should be paid to identifying practitioners who by temperament excel tactically and operationally in the arts of irregular warfare, regardless of rank.

5. The dichotomy between “counter-terrorism” and “counter-insurgency” is a false distinction designed to force political choices. Too many scholars now have their reputations and careers staked on the efficacy and durability or failure of FM 3-24 and how it relates to the competing narratives about its use on the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan. While we embrace these debates because they are intellectually vital for a nation at war, ultimately we must move on and find new means of analyzing irregular conflicts America is likely to face. “COIN” is not the “graduate school of war” because all forms of modern war-making are complex and are guided by intellectual responses to complicated events and ideas.

6. FM 3-24 fails to fully define the insurgencies and insurgents likely to bepopulate a complex war amongst the people. The very definition of “insurgency” used in the manual is outmoded and simplistic. Rapid changes in the ways of waging and funding guerrilla warfare -- often with deterritorialized support, virtual audiences and transcendently global objectives -- have transformed at the pace of 21st century technological and operational innovation. Better analysis on how humiliation, revenge, dishonor, alienation, conspiracy theories, adventurism, injustice and other feelings and compulsions spur individuals and movements to insurgency should be provided alongside the best advice on how to mitigate these causative forces (which also are often the consequences of our intervention and operations).

7. Locked in time because of reputational and institutional taboos, FM 3-24 has not kept pace either describing post-Maoist conflicts or prescribing solutions to them. Partly this is because of the very form a field manual takes, but it’s also for a range of other reasons that could be partially mitigated by rewriting it. Case studies might serve today’s readers better than the typical format of field manuals. Building it by wiki or more informal methods of reaching junior personnel should be strongly considered.

8. The center of gravity for a counter-insurgent might or might not fall upon the population confined to the borders of the state suffering rebellion. Even if a frontline population is the center of gravity in a campaign, care must be given during the confection of any manual to address the different natures and goals of host populations, diaspora populations from all sides in the dispute and the populations of those nations that have sought to intervene in the conflict. Questions should be asked whether one today can script a pacification campaign that addresses realistically all or even most of these dispersed multiple and multiplying populations. The same goes for guerrillas in what some now term the “Federated Insurgency Complex,” the complicated and shifting mix of enemies, bandits and militias on the irregular battlefield.

9. “COIN” can’t be described or prescribed by checklists or examples from history deemed timeless. While potentially helpful as a thought exercise, unempirical notions such as David Galula’s assurance that the political dimension of COIN is “80 percent political and 20 percent military” should be strongly reconsidered in light of learned lessons in today’s ongoing wars

10. Questions also should be asked about our continued strategic focus on an indirect approach to achieving foreign policy goals. This requires a willing host nation regime that will “out govern” guerrillas or “terrorize” terrorists who might, or might not, be seeking to rule. Sections such as 1-147 are simplistic and often contradicted by real world experiences and should be rewritten.

11. In an attempt to posit timeless truths about insurgency and counter-insurgency, FM 3-24 removed the primacy and complexity of history. All “COIN” is local in the sense that insurrection is motivated by complex social forces or set to goals that often are animated by theological, economic, kinship or ideological concerns a foreign intervening army initially is unlikely to fathom, much less address through selective applications of force or suasion. Care should be given in better understanding and advising on the uses of economic development projects, support to host nation governments and other assumptions about achieving broad support of people who are in revolt or leaning toward insurrection. It is our concern that some prescriptive advice in FM 3-24 might prolong insurgencies or retard the ability of host nations to reach the “recovery” and “outpatient care” stages described in 5-5 and 5-6.

12. Violence is a natural condition of war. Practitioners of “COIN” should have no illusions about the need to kill guerrillas, destroy property, seize terrain and practice coercive practices to achieve necessary ends. Euphemisms and anodyne obfuscations should not be employed to describe processes that are brutal, even if not all lines of operations involve brutality. The application of violence nevertheless should fall under the rule of law and the traditional norms of battlefield morality. Practices that are abhorrent to the professional member of the military are outlawed by statute and treaty, including torture, should be prohibited even if perceived by some to be efficacious.

13. Not once in FM 3-24 is the term “propaganda of the deed” used. A rewrite should build upon 3-120 and 6-78 to restore primacy to propaganda of the deed as an operational concept used by guerrillas to wage war. This also will restore to the centrality of COIN the notion of “psychology” and compel practitioners to consider the social forces causing the revolt and the second- and third-order consequences of their actions seeking to solve or mitigate them. This will require an expansion of B-23.

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