

A View of Irregular Warfare

A Work in Progress (Draft)

Colonel Daniel Kelly

SWJ Editors Note: We present this draft (work in progress) essay to encourage feedback by Small Wars Journal readership. The author welcomes comments and suggestions that add to our understanding of the complex operational environments of today – and – tomorrow.

In June 2007, I reported aboard Marine Corps Base Quantico to establish the USMC Center for Irregular Warfare. A Director with no staff, I jumped right into the maelstrom of the challenging environment called Irregular Warfare (IW). Armed with the new tools of my trade, the Multi-Service Concept for Irregular Warfare, a draft version of the Irregular Warfare Joint Operating Concept, the *Small Wars Manual* and several articles by Frank Hoffman¹ I was ready to do my duty for the Marine Corps.

It did not take long to see that this thing called Irregular Warfare had taken on a life of its own as an untamable monster. My initial journey through Pentagon hallways to countless seminars, workshops and war games was marked by acquaintances with “duty experts” whose views on IW were as numerous as they were varied. Some the common views include:

“Irregular Warfare is not irregular, it’s regular”

“Irregular Warfare is nothing more than a mindset”

“Irregular Warfare is an operational theme within the spectrum of conflict”

“We need to develop IW Campaign Plans, IW mission sets, IW tasks, IW Skills”

“Irregular Warfare is the future of warfare, Traditional Warfare is a thing of the past”

“We don’t do IW; IW is what the enemy does to us”

“IW is nothing more than COIN”

To say that I drank the Kool-Aid of IW would be an understatement - I was drowning in it.

Fast-forwarding to August 2008 finds me with a staff of six personnel, a sign in front of my modular trailer and the state of IW theory and practice much unchanged. We are actively engaged in a wide range of IW related issues ranging from working the wickets of a “Whole of Government” (WOG) approach, to attending IW Steering Committee and Combating Terrorism Coordination Council meetings, to working several Train, Advise,

and Assist Working Groups. We are working a Capabilities Based Assessment for IW, providing input to the Strategic Vision Group papers, conducting studies, and providing IW classes to Think Tanks and other organizations. In addition, we have been actively engaged with our sister services and multi-national partners. I say this not to “blow our own horn”, but to convey that, while we have been working IW, we’ve had little time to really think about IW, what it is and what it isn’t. I figured that after a year of having to sit through this, I was now one of the “duty experts” with my own set of views on IW.

It was during a recent three-day Quadrennial Roles and Mission IW Issue Team seminar, where IW was discussed in every aspect from IW Strategies to Phase 0 IW operations, that I reached my culminating point. Bottom-line - there is no consensus on IW within the Services, Department of Defense (DoD) and Congress. It was time to close the door for a day to look through my notes for the past year, talk with a few “trusted agents”, sit back and think.

What I have finally come up with is not earth shattering or out of the box. I like to call it distilling the 500-pound brain concepts and ideas down to my 5-pound brain level. IW has initiated some good conversation, ideas and concepts, but I believe it has taken on a life of its own and needs to be readdressed in a more holistic approach. I would caveat that by adding that the term “conventional warfare” must also be removed from our lexicon if we are to take the next step in addressing the operating environment we are and will be facing - a complex environmentⁱⁱ that requires a Whole of Government (WOG) approach to succeed (conventional or irregular) in the foreseeable future. As noted by Sir Robert Thompson in 1962:

The government must have an overall plan. This plan must cover not just the security measures and military operations. It must include all political, social, economic, administrative, police and other measures which have a bearing on the insurgency (adversary/enemy). Above all it must clearly define roles and responsibilities to avoid duplication of effort and to ensure that there are no gaps in the government’s field of action.ⁱⁱⁱ

To put this in context of our future operating environment the Marine Corps has introduced the concept of hybrid warfare.

Hybrid Wars combine a range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder.^{iv}

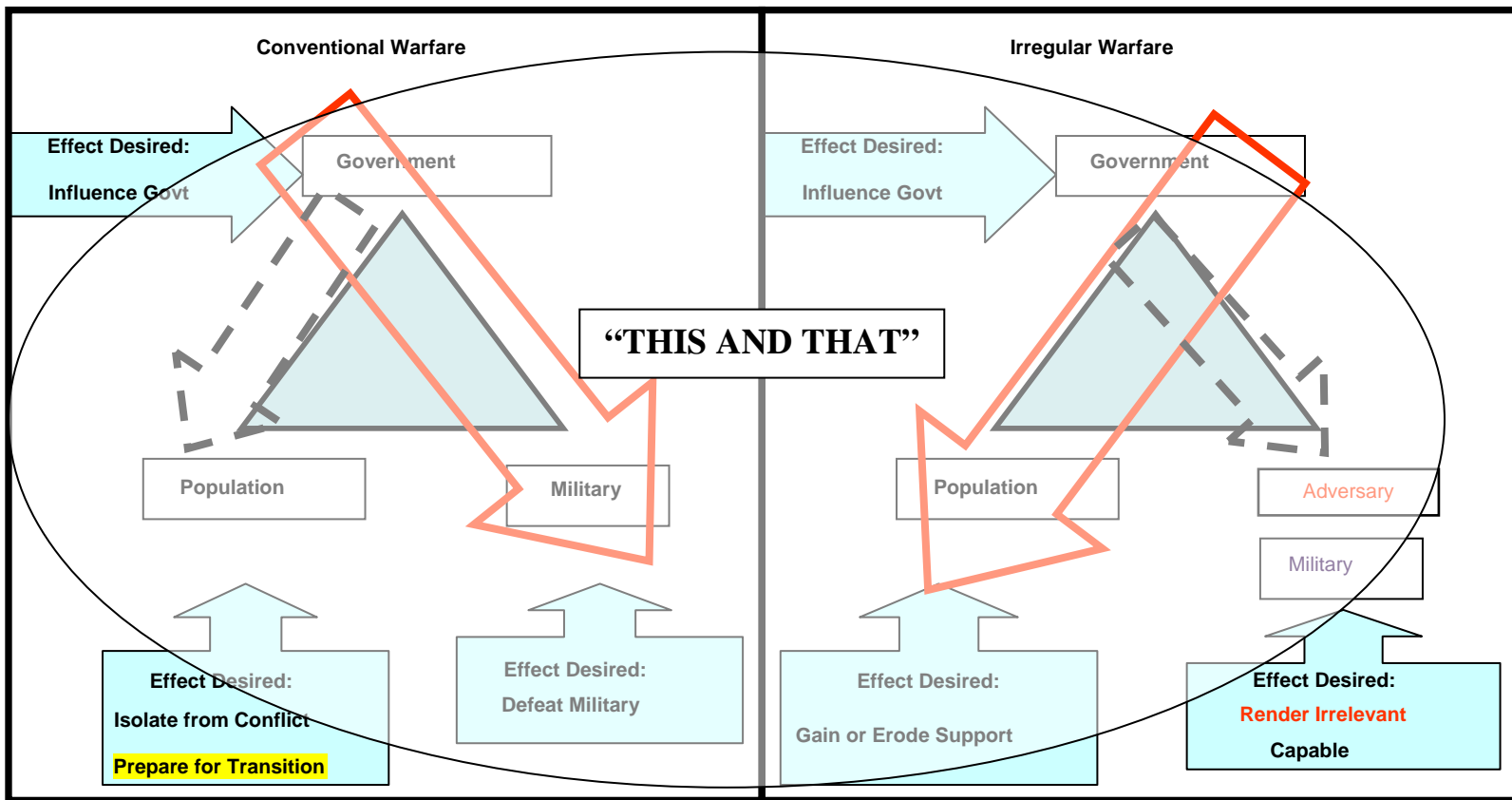
Hybrid Warfare addresses current and future adversaries’ use of a wide range of tools based on their capability and capacities against us; we must take the same approach in countering these threats. By trying to always place threats and capabilities into a “bin” (i.e. IW or Conventional) we have a tendency to focus on “*this or that*”, while our adversaries’ view is “*this and that*”. The concept of having an IW Campaign plan and developing IW forces and IW doctrine reinforces the argument that we are not taking a holistic approach in addressing the future. We need to look at a comprehensive approach

that addresses the issues associated with facing a foe that may possess both conventional and irregular capabilities.

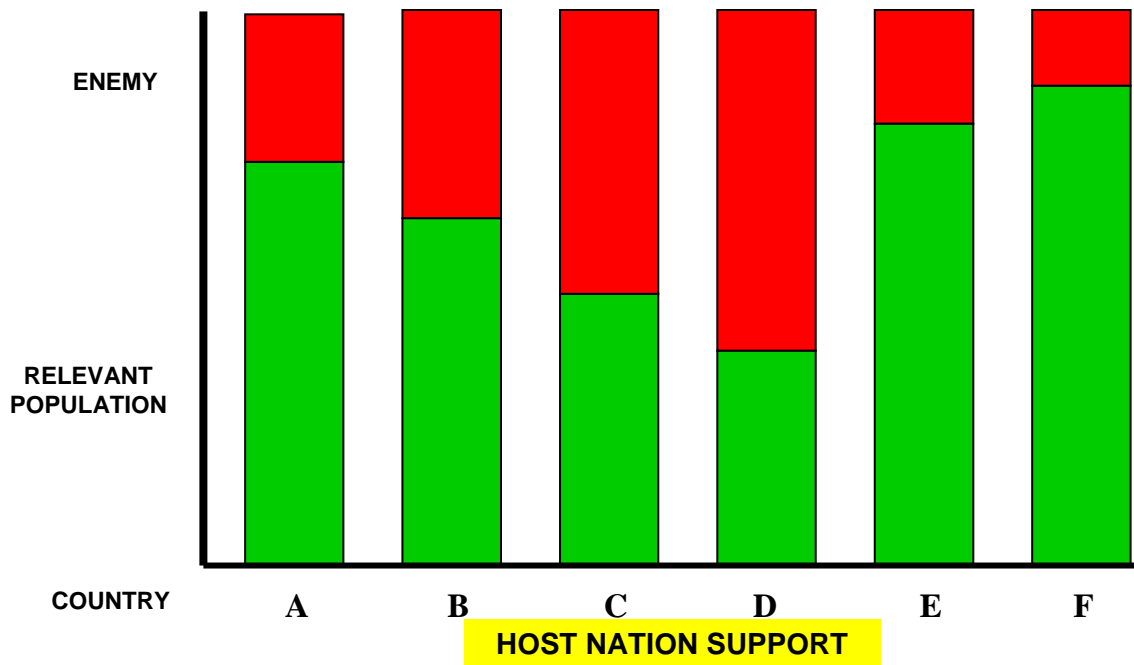
Assuming that conventional warfare focuses on defeating an enemy's military while irregular warfare focuses on the relevant population, any operation or campaign should consider *both* the enemy *and* the relevant population. In addition, executing a Whole of Government approach requires unity of effort. It boils down to identifying focus of effort.

Another tool for providing unity is through the focus of effort. Of all the efforts going on within our command, we recognize the focus of effort as the most critical to success. All other efforts must support it. In effect, we have decided: This is how I will achieve a decision; everything else is secondary."

The graph that follows is modified from the IW Joint Operating Concept (JOC) to more accurately reflect the necessity to address both the enemy and the relevant population in any operation.



The next chart examines the focus of effort on the enemy and the relevant population based on a *country approach*. This allows for a more *holistic approach in planning* operations in a complex environment. Based on the operating environment, the focus will transition between the enemy and the relevant population. It may or will fluctuate; one becomes the focus of effort while the other becomes the supporting effort.



The chart shows that in Country A, a Joint Interagency Task Force’s efforts to help the relevant population may be the main effort while its subordinate Special Operations element’s effort against the enemy is the supporting effort. Conversely, Country D depicts a situation requiring a Joint Task Force as the main effort against the enemy with a subordinate interagency element as a supporting effort to help the populace. Each country or crisis requires a different balance of effort and cannot be labeled as either a conventional or irregular operation.

Determining the balance of efforts requires us to identify the enemy and the relevant population. This is easier said than done. Understanding the cultural aspects and details of the crisis at hand is critical to placing the situation into proper context. One of the benefits of recent initiatives related to IW has been the focus on cultural intelligence, (human terrain mapping, tribal / clan dynamics socio-economic issues) within a region/country. Integrate this with the push to enhance information sharing across the whole of government and the right steps are being taken to address the “cultural battlefield”. Both of these are critical to successful operations and mission execution in a Whole of Government Approach within the *complex operational environment, not just an “irregular warfare environment.”*

A benefit of the current emphasis on IW is the attention it has brought to developing a Whole of Government approach to conducting complex operations. The downside is that

this approach has been associated only with IW when, in fact, all operations have a Whole of Government component. While there are no easy fixes to solving interagency (IA)-related deficiencies, the Department of State (DoS,) per National Security Presidential Directive-44 has been assigned the lead on coordinating the IA effort of the US Government. Though positive steps are being taken there still exists a requirement for a more comprehensive plan of coordination and collaboration between DoD and DoS to ensure a unity of effort.

The current emphasis and debate concerning IW-related issues has better prepared CCDR's and Services to operate and support current and future operations in the complex operational environment. We are making progress in identifying and preparing to face the adversaries of the future and have begun to address Stability Operations more than just a "Phase 4" requirement.

We are examining initiatives like Security Force Assistance to develop self-sufficient partner nations and are making great strides in understanding the importance of information operations, psychological operations, civil military operations and strategic communications - those non-kinetic tools that have and will continue to have critical relevance in our current and future endeavors. Finally, we have identified funding, legal and legislative issues that need to be addressed to support our way ahead, and increase the GPF's ability to operate in support of the steady state.

While I salute the increased awareness on these important issues, IW has limited our overall focus on capabilities across the full range of military operations – especially those that are not IW in nature and scope. The rush to solve perceived IW-related shortfalls has not afforded decision makers and their staffs the luxury of taking an informed and measured approach in addressing an operating environment that many believe will exist for generations to come.

It has led Congress, DoD, and the Services to scramble to see what programs, resources, training and education they are putting towards IW, vice what we need to do to address this messy, ambiguous complex environment we are facing.

Colonel Daniel Kelly, a career Marine Infantry officer, is the Director of the US Marine Corps Center for Irregular Warfare. He has held a wide variety of command and staff billets and participated in numerous operations to include; Operations Restore Hope / Continue Hope, Somalia, Operation Allied Force / Joint Guardian, Kosovo, Operations Iraqi Freedom (OIF I and II). In addition Col Kelly participated in JTF Gitmo, JTF Katrina, and the Beirut NEO in 2006.

ⁱ LtCol Frank Hoffman (USMCR ret.) is a national security affairs analyst and consultant for the Marine Corps Center for Emerging Threats and Opportunities.

ⁱⁱ In this case I view Complex Environment to include globalization, instant access to provide and receive information, as well as the adversaries that we are facing.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sir Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, 1962, pg 55

^{iv} SVG Information paper, Feb 08. Would also look at states using non-state actors. Surrogates.

^v FMFM-1 Warfighting

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