Motto: “The wrong man can do more harm than the right man can do good”.

OM: In early 2009, I made a tour of a few DC think tanks. At the time everybody was talking about COIN. Why did COIN become a dirty word, today? Why do you still believe in COIN doctrine?

FL: Well, frankly I get a bit nervous whenever I hear the words "believe" and "doctrine" in the same sentence... the same way I get nervous when I hear people refer to the current counterinsurgency manual, FM 3-24, as "the good book." The counterinsurgency manual should never be dogma, never be seen as some sort of universal solution. The manual was an attempt to change the culture of the Army at a time when we desperately needed it. It was written by a group of very smart people who tried to include some lessons from Cold War-era insurgencies, but let's not fool ourselves--it was written in extremis, for forces struggling through their rotations in Iraq from 2006-2010. It did a pretty good job helping those units... and it serves as a decent framework for one type of counterinsurgency effort--the resource intensive, 'boots heavy' sort that we saw in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But we should not lose sight of the fact that this type of massive COIN effort is only one extreme of a long continuum of policy options, undertaken when the situation in both countries had already deteriorated so much that major reinforcement became the 'least bad' choice in the minds of our civilian leaders. If we want to keep COIN from becoming a 'dirty word,' as you say, we need to make this distinction clear, and leave room for alternate, smaller footprint models. The next version of the doctrine should not just pull lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan--but also from Colombia, the Philippines, El Salvador, the Sahel, and the myriad of other places we've been involved in over the past decades. To the credit of the Army and Marines, Ft. Leavenworth is in the midst of rewriting the manual as we speak--but it remains to be seen what kind of message the final product will send. Will we have a cookie cutter model with the five standard lines of effort, built around heavy resources and a 5,000-man brigade combat team or will we have a manual that offers a broad toolkit of different approaches--some civilian-led or embassy 'country team' based, some more heavily reliant on targeting and offshore training or 3rd party actors, et cetera. Knowing what we know about land wars in Asia, I'd personally much rather see the latter.

I think that's also the key to answering your other question, about why COIN is so rapidly falling out of vogue. Beyond it being really messy, difficult to judge success, and very time or resource intensive, I worry that over the course of these two wars the public perception of COIN has become totally synonymous with 'nation building.' Ask your average person in the street if they know we have soldiers working in the Philippines right now. We seem to forget that the American military has been involved in
insurgency and counterinsurgency efforts since the founding of our nation—and very few of them looked much like Iraq or Afghanistan. For one, resources were often severely constrained for political or economic reasons, and deployed advisors had to find creative ways to leverage local relationships and work through indigenous actors. El Salvador was falling apart in the 1980s and the United States government capped its advisor presence there at 55 personnel! In my opinion, one of the biggest problems with the 2006 COIN manual is that it doesn't emphasize enough the need to work through the Host Nation; it doesn't focus enough on the "by, with, and through" advisory part of the mission. To be fair, there is quite a bit of discussion about building security forces, but the tone of the book still screams 'heavy footprint,' with 50:1 ratios and coalition civilians and military doing the heavy lifting. I was just flipping through the pages of the manual again this morning, and I had to smile when I saw that 'Host Nation actors' is literally last on the list of 'likely participants in counterinsurgency.' What we really should be writing is a 'Support to Counterinsurgency' manual—how we "help others help themselves," as Secretary Gates has written. And that doesn't always require the kinds of resources and methods described in the book.

**OM:** Do you feel your own battlefield experiences have led you to think this way?

**FL:** Absolutely. Coming from the Special Forces community, I just had a very different introduction to the concept of insurgency and counterinsurgency. All our training is geared around very small groups of specially selected and trained operators working in remote areas with indigenous forces. Arriving at 7th Group as a brand new Captain, my very first deployment was to Colombia, where we were paired up with an elite unit working near the Venezuelan border. I learned about counterinsurgency by watching Colombian officers walk patrols into the nearby towns, engage with the locals, plan projects, process insurgent detainees, collect intelligence, prepare propaganda, just the whole range of activities—and the Colombians have been doing it for a long, long time. I’ve been back six times since then and each time I learn something new. Some of their reintegration programs, their interagency “acción integral” stability programs are unbelievably good. But even when I was later deployed to Iraq I kept hearing about 'small footprint' models because our team was attached to a lonely El Salvadoran battalion conducting counterinsurgency just south of Baghdad. It was really interesting because we’d be out conducting operations—whether it was a nighttime raid or a reconstruction project downtown—and these old El Salvadoran special operations guys or the colonels on staff would be telling us in Spanish how they still remembered the names of the American advisors that helped them during their civil war. It was such an honor to work with them. They’d tell us about how the war in the 1980s had shaped their country and their Army, and we saw firsthand that it helped them conduct their mission in Iraq.

Ultimately, we're all a product of our experiences, and we all have some inherent bias. All I can say is that based on my limited personal observations—working as a combat advisor in three wars, training foreign military units in Latin America, and conducting academic field research and interviews in a few other countries—I have been convinced that under the right conditions, counterinsurgency can work as part of a broader political strategy. But I've also sometimes seen it fail, or seen our enemies outperform us across almost every line of effort—particularly rule of law, governance, influence, and intelligence.

**OM:** Your job last year was to look at trends across the board. You embedded with nearly 20 Afghan battalions in Helmand, Kandahar and Zabul. To what extent have you seen progress in learning and adjusting their organizational culture to the population-centric COIN mindset? Were the Afghan units genuinely interested in understanding the local needs, in connecting with locals over a tea, in winning the support of the people and making the government legitimate in the eyes of the locals? Were they concerned with these issues? Did they have an organizational culture optimized for pop-centric COIN?
FL: There is quite a lag between American units and Afghan units when it comes to how quickly they're internalizing the COIN mindset and culture. American units have become much more interested in the non-kinetic aspects of the campaign, especially over the past three years, while many Afghan units are still very focused on just looking for the Taliban. But let's be honest. We as American military professionals were pretty slow to change. I remember being in Afghanistan in 2006 and the campaign was very, very different. Most commanders were basically executing a series of disconnected, large-scale 'sweep and clear' type operations for the duration of their deployments. We were completely enemy-focused. I remember a conventional brigade commander, who shall remain nameless, bragging about how one operation had 'used more helicopters and fired more artillery shells than any operation since the beginning of the war.' Even the Special Forces community was fixated on what we called 'combat reconnaissance patrols' that basically meant driving out of the FOB in search of a fight. We were measuring the wrong things and seeing the conflict the wrong way. So we wasted a lot of time, and we passed some of our bad habits onto the Afghans. And we were all guilty of it, myself included.

That being said, the culture in American units has improved significantly for counterinsurgency in recent years. I came away very impressed by many of the units I spent time with. But we're now having trouble figuring out how to influence our Afghan counterparts. Here are a few things to think about:

First, we as coalition advisors haven't spent nearly enough time getting to know the Afghan military's existing organizational culture and practices, and we keep trying to thrust our methods directly onto our partners with the expectation that the Afghans will continue to use them after we leave. So you see things like 'mission command' charts from Ft. Leavenworth on the walls of Afghan operations centers and Dari translations of the COIN manual sitting on their desks. Unfortunately, the Afghan Army still functions much like the old Soviet model in some key ways (Not a big surprise, given that many of their senior leaders were trained by Soviet advisors). Everything revolves around centralized control, and junior leaders have very little opportunity to exercise initiative. Non-commissioned officers are marginalized. Staff bureaucracies are extraordinarily rigid. And amongst the junior leaders, it's sometimes seen as better to follow orders to the letter and fail, rather than to make an unauthorized improvisation in the field and succeed. So we've taken an Afghan institution like this--one already suffering from overly centralized control and rigid bureaucracy--and we've given them PowerPoint and a bunch of doctrine charts so removed from anything they've seen that they can't hope to possibly internalize them.
To be clear, I'm not saying that we shouldn't try to affect the Afghans' organizational culture-- of course we should! But you're not going to show up for a 6 or 9-month tour, pull out your translated charts and slides and books, give a few classes, and see any lasting change. Maybe the Afghans will imitate some of your actions and do what they think will please you, but it's out the window the day you redeploy. Instead we should start with what they already know and make small changes in the margins. Play triage: What can you realistically change and what should you leave alone? What behavior or mindset or tactic--if you could harness and modify it a little--would truly most benefit the Afghan unit and its relationship with the local population? I remember an Afghan officer on a little patrol base in Helmand confiding to me that he didn't like to sit down with the locals in villages for tea because he was worried they would poison him. That's a perception you can work to change--how many of our own American soldiers start their deployments thinking every villager is just waiting for a chance to kill him? But you don't change it over night, and you don't change it without trying to understand it first. Don't get me wrong—there are some coalition units out there that have figured this out and are doing it extremely well, but there are others that don’t, and we need to get better at this if we want to succeed.

OM: You are part of a network of individuals (small expert teams embedded in Afghan units) with unique on the ground connections and experiences. Shouldn't you and your colleagues be poised to help do what you describe?

FL: The problem is, even as we get better at learning the Afghan perspective, most of the time our assignment cycles prevent any real continuity. We don’t return to the same areas to work with the same Afghans on successive deployments. Yet if we hope to impart meaningful institutional change on the Afghan security forces we are largely dependent on building long-term, trusted relationships between advisors and their Afghan counterparts--at all levels. You don't convince General Sherzai or Captain Aktar to let his subordinates take more initiative or spend more time engaging with locals by handing him a book or giving him a class. You become trusted friends, you earn his respect, you have a hundred conversations at night over dinner, you show him why it makes sense. But try building those relationships or influencing behavior when all the advisors change out every few months, never to return to the same Afghan units they've come to learn over the course of their deployment. This personnel churn kills us in the advisor mission because we have no sense of the trajectory of Afghan units over time, their personalities, or even major events in their district... Go up to any advisor in Afghanistan and ask him what happened in his area (or within his partner unit) 2 or 3 years ago, and he'll rarely know--it's ancient history because of all the rotations and personnel changes. But it's critical. Imagine a large corporation that had to change out every key position every 9 months. How could they get anything accomplished?

The AfPak Hands program, which I am now a member of, was an attempt to address some of these concerns about continuity. The idea was to select a small group of personnel, train them in language, and have them rotate in and out of the same key billets in Afghanistan and Pakistan over the course of several years. But we've had some real difficulties attracting the right people to the program. I mentioned this at the CNAS Conference, but I think it bears repeating... the old OSS quote about the selection of men? It just states that, "the wrong man can do more harm than the right man can do good." The OSS—the precursor organization to Special Forces and the CIA—would literally not execute missions if they couldn't find the right person to do it. That's almost an unfathomable philosophy to understand in our current military assignment culture. If there is a billet, then the personnel managers fill the billet, period. We have a talent-blind system in many ways, particularly for individual deployers that fill critical positions in staffs or on advisor teams. We see only a slot with a rank and the associated military specialty... "Major, Combat Arms Immaterial." It doesn't say, "I need someone with prior Afghan experience, who thrives as an advisor, who is a top 20% performer." But in an environment where
relationships in the field are so important and the demands on advisors are so great, we can't afford to do that. I'd rather see a program have 30 really talented people instead of 300 mediocre ones, even if it means leaving some positions empty and accepting that we can't grow too fast. And admittedly, in the case of AfPak Hands, this was a very tough mission to recruit for, given that it asks volunteers to spend 3-4 years away from their standard career path.

OM: Is there a way to improve the system?

FL: What could we have done better for AfPak Hands? Did we make it too joint? Did we really need so many Air Force and Navy slots to do traditionally Army-centric jobs that involved embedded advising, ground combat, or support to special operations? Did we need a better mechanism to turn unsuitable people away when they reported for training, or to modify jobs in theater? These are hard questions, and I don't know all the answers. I'm sure right now in the Pentagon, there are people much smarter than me pondering all of this. But just consider the Air Force members of our cohort. Ask an Air Force officer where the majority of their best and brightest are, and he'll probably say the pilots. (I know I'm going to get some hate mail for this one, but just consider it for the sake of argument) Now try convincing a fast-track, top notch fighter pilot that he needs to stop flying, learn Dari or Pashto, and spend 3-4 years rotating in and out of Afghanistan, after which he's probably not going to be promoted. Very rare, the officer that volunteers under those conditions. Now, we have some phenomenal AfPak Hands out there who did exactly that--LtCol "Bruiser" Bryant, who was tragically killed in the attack at the Kabul airport last year--he was one of the best, and he volunteered for the program even though he was previously an F-16 pilot living the dream. There are a dozen other examples I can think of, really talented people. But it's very hard to get more people like "Bruiser" without better incentives or a better way of recruiting, selecting and training people. We end up with officers that were 'volun-told' to participate in the program, or that weren't the most qualified people but opted in because they didn't have other alternatives. And the great people that are in the program usually have made a conscious choice to sacrifice their careers. This frankly is dangerous to the reputation of the program because commanders in theater are told that AfPak Hands will be "strategic game changers", but the reality that walks through the door is much different. They see a few really good people, but also some who probably have no interest or ability to work as advisors. Do I still believe in the program? Absolutely. I think that, as a concept, the program has tremendous potential, not only in Afghanistan, but as a possible model for other regions--but the devil's in the details. We still have serious work to do improving the implementation and incentives and training.

Now think about these personnel issues on the larger scale—not just AfPak Hands. What is going to drive who gets selected to go to Afghanistan over the crucial next few years? Maybe I'm a pessimist, but I can just imagine the choice that personnel managers are going to have to make: We're running out of war. For someone in the conventional Army, there are two, perhaps three years to rotate into a combat tour in Afghanistan or its likely never going to happen because of the troop drawdown and the increasing role of SOF there. So as a manager who oversees the assignments of units or individuals, isn't it your duty to rotate people who have never been to combat or never been to Afghanistan into theater before the opportunity goes away? What's more, don't those soldiers that have already served once or twice with distinction in Afghanistan deserve a break? These are all plausible, logical arguments—but unfortunately they are exactly the opposite of what is needed on the ground. With fewer troops available and time running out, now is the time for the best, most experienced advisors that have already proven themselves in Afghanistan. It's a Catch-22 of sorts.

OM: At the CNAS Annual Conference you made a T.E. Lawrence or Edmund Burke type of argument when Rajiv Chandrasekaran asked you about using plasma screens with Afghan units: “unless it is organic to the Afghans, and frankly, a lot of this is going to be paper and pen-based type stuff... it's not going to be accepted. I like to think about the advisor mission for us a little bit like “Inception,” you know, Leo Dicaprio going into people’s dreams– so it’s a little bit like that in that
you are trying to get inside their minds and trying to get them to believe that that idea, the tactic, the procedure that they’re using was their own idea, not yours”. What is organic for the Afghans, and do they have any real chance of succeeding after coalition troops withdraw?

FL: Ha, yeah I was hoping that analogy wouldn’t be lost in front of that crowd! Look, what I was trying to do was point to a bit of good news: The Afghan security forces don’t have to look like the U.S. Army or Marines to accomplish their mission. They just have to be marginally more legitimate than the Taliban in the eyes of the locals, and marginally better at fighting. This is not an impossible goal, and in fact there are many ways that the Afghan military has a huge comparative advantage over the United States when it comes to conducting counterinsurgency. For one, no matter how much Dari or Pashto training my fellow AfPak Hands and I may receive before our deployments, we’re never going to be as good at talking to local Afghan villagers as another Afghan. I can grow a beard, study Pashtunwali and wear Afghan uniforms, but I’ll never be one tenth as good as an Afghan officer. Moreover, when we talk about our own troops’ lack of continuity and constant rotations, consider that some of the Afghan soldiers out there have been in the same district for literally 4 or 5 years continuously! Imagine if, instead of filling our own databases and holding our own shuras in the village, we’d been focusing on doing everything we could to connect those Afghan soldiers to the local villagers outside the gate of their FOB? Imagine the kind of relationships and situational awareness that can be built over 4 or 5 years in the same area.

But it’s embarrassing how rarely we capitalize on this innate potential. Too often, my teammates and I would walk patrols with partnered coalition and Afghan units and watch the same scene play out. An eager 23-year old all-American lieutenant, full of energy, would be trying to talk to a local villager through an interpreter. And inevitably, the conversation starts sounding like a tactical interrogation: “Hello I am Lieutenant Jones and I am from America. Can you tell me where the Taliban is? Have you seen any IEDs? Have you seen any suspicious people?” We don’t do small talk. And of course the patrol doesn’t get any useful information. Everyone is terrified to talk to them. But to the American soldiers, the silence makes it seem like the whole village supports the Taliban. They feel like every patrol is Groundhog Day, and like they’re just out there walking around. Yet during embeds we started to notice that while the young lieutenant was struggling through his conversation, there would almost always be an Afghan Army soldier--born and raised in the Pashtun areas of the country--standing a few meters away. And he’d usually be relegated to pulling security and staring out over his rifle instead of engaging with the locals. After the patrol, we’d ask the young lieutenant “Do you know how many native Pashto speakers (vice Dari) you have in your Afghan platoon? Had you ever considered training them to talk to the locals and get information?” I can literally count on one hand the number of times the lieutenant knew… and this was out of maybe a hundred platoons over 14 months. We just tend to not do a great job informally identifying and cultivating talent amongst the Afghans. We don’t leverage their potential because we often don’t see it. Sometimes we fall into the trap of shrugging our shoulders and calling the Afghans lazy or ignorant, and we completely miss out on the chance to build something that actually might be sustainable after we leave. One of my teammates and I—he was a Navy SEAL with lots of time doing intelligence work—we grew so frustrated by this that we even developed a patrolling framework called “Give-Take-Train” to help young leaders in the field take advantage of the Afghans’ potential at their level… in the next couple weeks we’ll be writing it into a small article for SWJ. The title of the piece will be ”The Patrol that Never Was.”

OM: Why do you think the soldiers miss out on these opportunities to leverage their Afghan partners?

FL: Part of this is cultural, I think. Our troops are amazingly capable and energized and brave. But as Americans we come from a ‘can do’ culture and want to step up and take charge personally instead of
supporting the Afghans from behind the scenes... I remember reading a story in the American press a couple years ago about a young captain becoming the "Mayor of Maiwand." It was basically about a charismatic, talented American officer that had managed to win over the support of the local population in a big way... everyone seemed to love him, and he'd become known as the man who could fix any problem in the district. Seems like a real 'feel good' story, right? But I don't want the American to be the Mayor of Maiwand! What happens when he rotates home and someone else replaces him, maybe someone less attuned to Afghans and less charismatic? The district is back where it started from or worse. Let the mayor of Maiwand be the mayor of Maiwand. Same thing in the Afghan Army--let the Afghan leaders lead. Yes it's much harder. Yes it takes three times as long, and the mission may barely get accomplished. Yes it's extraordinarily frustrating. But the campaign can't succeed without soldiers in the field truly embracing this mindset. Many of them do—there are some fantastic advisors out there working right now, and we should acknowledge their tremendous efforts and sacrifice—but we can do more to engender the right mindset within troops rotating to Afghanistan over these next critical years, to help them learn how to think about the advisor mission. Like my SEAL teammate would often say to the platoons we worked with: "Imagine that at the end of your deployment no American unit was coming to replace you. Imagine that you’re the last chance we have to get the Afghans ready to take over responsibility in this area. How would that change what you do on a daily basis? How would you operate differently?"

OM: Was the past COIN decade an anomaly? Do you expect a return to pre-9/11 business as usual? To get back to an organization trained mainly for conventional war core functions?

FL: I think the pendulum is already swinging the other way, and it’s picking up speed. I just graduated from Intermediate Level Education, which I’m sure you know is the required school for all majors in the Army. Guess what our culminating 2-week long planning exercise scenario was? We planned a deliberate defense against an attacking tank division that was fighting with Soviet tactics. Literally. Combat Reconnaissance Patrol, Forward Security Element, the whole nine yards. I thought I was back in the Infantry Officer Basic Course circa 1998. It was like the whole decade had never happened. Some of the students were quite irritated. In a question and answer session at the end of the scenario, we asked, “Why didn’t we at least include some sort of an irregular component to this exercise? Shouldn’t we still be concerned with counterinsurgency?” The reply was that the scenario was part of a deliberate decision by the leadership, and that the Army had drifted too far from its roots and needed to get back to its core functions.

Look, I get it. I probably agree more than I disagree with Colonel Gian Gentile. He has some very valid points about needing to hone conventional capabilities. But is this how we build the right capabilities? Can we not be slightly more imaginative than creating a notional enemy that invades using Soviet tactics? I’m personally much more concerned about hybrid threats—irregular forces with high-end weaponry. Let’s seriously study Hezbollah. Or at least let’s look at likely conventional scenarios with significant irregular components to them. Let’s think about how social media impacts revolutionary movements after what we saw in Tahrir Square. There was a great paper by LTC Brian Petit a couple months ago that started to ask those questions. I also think John Robb is really onto something when he talks about “Open Source Warfare” and compares the crowd at Tahrir to the crowd at Occupy DC. Bottom line: We need to be way more nuanced in how we think about potential enemies and future challenges—instead of just pulling out the old Soviet order of battle charts and calling them by another name.

In terms of roles and responsibilities, we have these two extreme arguments circulating around, to COIN or not to COIN. I think they’re both wrong. I don’t think we’re well served by repurposing the whole
Army to fight counterinsurgency as its primary mission. On the other hand, I think it’s just as bad a
decision to train the entire Army primarily for conventional conflict, returning counterinsurgency purely
to the domain of the special operations community. I think even a cursory glance around the world shows
us that the demand for military training and advice and assistance overseas is going to far exceed what
special operations can do alone.

OM: So what do you think should be done?

FL: I see the answer as somewhere in between. It first requires us to acknowledge that not everyone can
do advisory missions, not everyone can do counterinsurgency. We may muddle our way through it, but to
be effective—especially if we hope to use a ‘small footprint’ model that is less resource intensive and
more flexible—we need some degree of specialization, even if its just a small fraction of the existing
conventional force. The Brigade Combat Team-centric model, built around 3 year force generation
cycles, may have served us well rotating units into the steady state requirements in Iraq and Afghanistan.
But can it hold up if we hope to build some sort of advisory capability to work in different regions of the
world? In this sense I think the special operations community can help the conventional force quite a bit.
One of the most important things I learned in 7th Group (where our regional orientation was Latin
America) was the power of language and repeated assignments to the same region. The senior field
grades, warrant officers, and senior non-commissioned officers in my unit had often deployed a dozen
times or more to Latin America. Most spoke Spanish, even the ones from Ohio or Brooklyn. Most had
known the generals in the countries where we worked since they were only lieutenants—they enjoyed
private, inside jokes. They knew the various military units and personalities better than anyone in the U.S.
Embassy. But this process had taken years and years to bear fruit. I’ve seen some of the initial concepts
for regionally-aligned forces, and I’m glad to see that the big Army is taking some steps to improve those
capabilities. But it’s hard to imagine simply assigning a Brigade Combat Team to a region of the world
for 3 years and expecting to grow anything similar, no matter how much pre-deployment training is
available. These conflicts aren’t “plug and play.”

Instead, we may finally have to acknowledge the need for a specialized force to help SOF conduct these
types of missions overseas. John Nagl wrote about creating an “Advisor Corps.” While I agree with him
that some sort of force is probably needed beyond the capabilities already resident in SOCOM, I disagree
with him pretty strongly about implementation. Knowing what we know about the difficulties of
attracting talented people to new programs, I worry that a brand new, separate Advisor Corps would end
up as a proverbial leper colony, an island of misfit toys. Volunteers would be asked to take the leap of
faith associated with leaving a Brigade, with none of the benefits in training, reputation, or resources
associated with joining the special operations community. At the same time, further trying to grow the
Special Forces regiment is also perilous because there is obviously a maximum yield of operators that can
be recruited, screened and trained without risking lowering standards. Last thing we want to do trying to
meet the demand for global advisory missions is to make Special Forces no longer “special.”

OM: Then where would you build the new unit?

FL: I’m just going to throw this out there, but why not build a brigade of combat advisors within U.S.
Army Special Operations Command? Instead of trying to create more Green Berets, we leave them to
focus on their primary mission—Unconventional Warfare (that is, support to insurgencies and resistance
movements). Of course, they still retain their Foreign Internal Defense capability, but they focus on
advisor missions where the level of difficulty and the risk are relatively high. At the same time, we also
build an advisor unit—likely a brigade-sized force or slightly larger—whose primary mission is purely
Security Force Assistance? We could potentially use a model similar to the existing Ranger Regiment,
where leaders have to first serve with distinction in a conventional unit, then can request to transfer over.
A selection and training process would also be necessary, but it would likely be less intensive because of the nature of the mission. We’d be selecting people to serve as advisors to foreign militaries where some semblance of order already exists, not to parachute in behind enemy lines and support an insurgent movement with minimal support or guidance. Yet think of all the benefits: We’d be building a continuum of capabilities to deal with different scenarios overseas. Special Forces, intelligence, and counterterrorism units at one end, ready to operate in very sensitive or unstable environments and do what they already do…work with revolutionary movements, kill and capture terrorists, build irregular self-defense forces, and train high-end host nation commandos or special police. In the middle of the continuum would be the new advisor brigade, focused on sending small teams out to conduct foreign internal defense missions in places that aren’t quite as sensitive but still involve a significant threat and require them to operate in small units with minimal supervision. They also have the benefit of being part of SOCOM for training and resources, so it would be much easier to gain synergy between what Special Forces ODAs are doing and what these new advisor elements would be doing—for instance if they are working in the same country but with different units. And finally at the other end of the response spectrum, there would be more ad hoc arrangements to respond to “surge” requirements or unforeseen demands in certain countries—things like regionally aligned forces, the National Guard’s state partnership program, security force assistance teams, or the advisor training brigade at Fort Polk. But again, this is just Lujan throwing out some ideas that a few of us have been talking about over our beers.

OM: Well that answers the military question, but expeditionary COIN is not only about training and advising foreign armies, but also about shaping foreign civilian organizations and institutions to provide governance or public services. Doesn’t the U.S. need also a Civilian Advisor Corps able to provide guidelines in what we can call the civilian tasks of a COIN campaign?

FL: We absolutely need some capability in the civilian arena, yes. The question is how best to build it. I’m more of the mindset that we should be studying the way that GEN McChrystal and crew built a networked, adaptive military-civilian interagency infrastructure to conduct counterterrorism after 9/11. Of course, much of that story is still sensitive and not for public release. But even stripping out all the operational details, there are some real lessons in organizational dynamics and teambuilding and internal politics that can be learned there. I’m talking about the way a relatively small group of people created a purpose-built network to kill and capture terrorists. I think a similar model can be undertaken to create a purpose-built network to conduct the indirect approach—unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, security force assistance, even genocide prevention using both civilian and military tools. But small-scale. Networks of very capable, specially selected and trained people from different agencies, different countries. I definitely don’t think you’re just going to be able to create a brand new organization out of nowhere, be it Nagl’s Combat Advisor Corps or a Civilian Advisor Corps without running into some truly insurmountable issues.

OM: Last question. You were quoted in Paula Broadwell’s recent book as saying, “COIN is that kind of fight - too fluid and dynamic to draw old lessons from. To develop real insight, you have to stay connected to conflict in a very real, very direct way”. What did you mean by that?

FL: I think what I was saying there is that we all have a shelf life when we come out of the field. I’ve been back for a year now and mine is almost up. It’s time to go back out there and test the theories again, learn more, figure out what needs to change. I’m headed back to Afghanistan in a few months, thanks to the AfPak Hand program. I’d love to see more flexibility to do that for my generation of officers and the one that follows us. Let’s make fewer distinctions between our ‘operators’ and our ‘academics.’ Change the personnel systems so people can cross back and forth without sacrificing their careers. A former boss of mine, COL Ike Wilson, called it the “Indiana Jones model.” Strive to spend half your time in the field
and half your time reading, teaching, writing or informing policy. I like that model a lot, and I aim to try to keep it up for as long as they’ll let me. I think if we can do that on a larger scale—across the generation of junior and mid-level leaders that are coming out of these wars—we’ll be stronger for it as a nation.

We’ll make smarter policy because our decisions will be informed by people who have actually been in the field, and who continue to go out there. Secretary Gates, in that last speech he made at West Point, really inspired quite a few of us when he said that we should look at Colonel Russell Volckmann as a role model instead of General MacArthur. Well he didn’t specifically say ‘not MacArthur,’ but I’m going let myself keep imagining that’s what he meant. I paraphrase, but he basically said things like ‘go learn a language, spend time working in the interagency, be a foreign area specialist, go to grad school, don’t be afraid to go off the beaten career path.’ I really think that’s the key to being an effective leader in the current environment—we need truly multi-dimensional men and women.

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