

T.E. Lawrence: A Leadership Vignette for the Successful Counter-Insurgent

Crispin Burke

In the last few years, the Army has established the leadership ideal of the “pentathlete”. Pentathletes are leaders who are not only competent in their core warrior skills, but who are also scholars; men and women who are creative, innovative, strategically-minded, culturally competent, and skilled in all aspects of peace, war, politics, and civil administration. In short, the Army needs the type of leader who excels in what we would like to term “Fourth Generation Warfare”. Thomas Edward Lawrence, (1888-1935), known the world over as “Lawrence of Arabia” lived up to all of these leadership attributes. Indeed, his life story is of incredible significance now, especially in light of the US Army’s mission in culturally alien environments conducting counterinsurgency. Against the backdrop of the Middle Eastern Theatre of the First World War, we will examine the personality of this most eccentric character and discover that he possessed many of the characteristics required of the successful counter-insurgent of the 21st Century. We will also examine the subtle nuances of his persona which irked the British Army of the early 20th Century as much as they would annoy the American Army nearly a century later.

A tragedy of America’s educational system is that many young people today have never heard of the late Lt. Col. T.E. Lawrence. Older generations may know Lawrence through Peter O’Toole’s portrayal of him in the Oscar-winning movie “Lawrence of Arabia”, released in 1962. Few, however, know Lawrence for what he really was: a brilliant writer, strategist, philosopher, archaeologist, and adventurer. In fact, the British politician George Lloyd noted that Lawrence was one of the few men capable not only of having great adventures, but also having the pen and wit to record them.¹

T.E. Lawrence and the Arab Revolt

At first glance, Lawrence seems like an unlikely candidate for a war hero. He was the second-oldest illegitimate son of Sir Thomas Chapman and his mistress. He never grew more than 5’5”, ten inches shorter than his cinematic counterpart. As a boy, he was soft-spoken, effeminate and “well-manicured”;² and shied away from organized sports³, a far cry from typical British officers of the day, who placed as much emphasis on rugby as we

¹ Mack, John E. *A Prince of Our Disorder: The Life of T.E. Lawrence*. Harvard University Press. Harvard, Massachusetts. 1998. Page 153.

² Ibid, p. 445.

³ Ibid, p. 81.

now seem to place on ultimate frisbee. What Lawrence lacked in the realm of organized sports, however, he made up for in individual feats of endurance; he was an avid climber and cyclist⁴. In fact, his legendary resilience would serve him well during The War, where he was reported to regularly ride over one hundred miles a day on camel through the desert⁵.

Although he possessed incredible physical endurance, it was his academic and literary pursuits which helped set the stage for his success as a military leader⁶. Lawrence had a fascination with history, archaeology and classical studies (he would later translate Homer's *Odyssey*)⁷. As a teenager, he left England to study castles from the Crusades in the Middle East, as well as other archaeological ruins, most notably the ancient wonder of Petra (in modern-day Jordan), as well as the port city of Akaba—areas he would later fight in during the First World War. In addition to learning the lay of the land, Lawrence learned Arab culture, and became fluent in Arabic⁸.

When war broke out in Europe in 1914, Lawrence joined the British Army, where, based on his knowledge of Arabia, he received a commission and a posting as an intelligence officer in Cairo, the headquarters for the British Egypt Expeditionary Force⁹.

During his time as a junior intelligence officer, Lawrence gained recognition from many British officials, including the British High Commissioner Henry McMahon, who said that Lawrence was “one of our best of our very able intelligence staff...and has a thorough knowledge of the Arab question in all its bearings”¹⁰. Unfortunately, not all shared these sentiments. Many of his fellow officers felt that he was juvenile and immature, and despised hearing this “youngster” correct them on matters of Arab affairs¹¹. Additionally, they frequently complained that Lawrence was sloppily dressed and that he badly needed a haircut¹², complaints that have been heard in armies for generations.

From 1914-1916, Lawrence wasted away performing frivolous duties. He spent much of his time drawing and preparing maps. During the summer of 1916, Lawrence's extraordinary creative abilities were spent on the most laborious and challenging task of creating a postage stamp for the Hejaz region (modern-day Saudi Arabia)--certainly not a task suitable for such a promising and exceptional young officer.¹³ Had Lawrence been alive today, he might have likely been the ultimate “PowerPoint Ranger”.

⁴ Ibid, p. 38.

⁵ Ibid, p. 200-201.

⁶ Lt. Col. John Nagl notes in “Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife” that the theme of an intellectual officer in a notably unintellectual environment (i.e., the British Army) is one that repeats itself throughout British military history.

⁷ Ibid, p. 319.

⁸ Ibid, p. 69-75.

⁹ Ibid p. 130.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 138.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 129.

¹² Ibid, p. 132

¹³ Mack, p. 142.

The Egypt Expeditionary Force was led by General Sir Archibald Murray (1860-1945), a most unpopular commander who had been relieved of command twice in Europe in 1915 before being moved to the “sideshow operation” in Egypt, where he would be relieved of command yet again after a year and a half¹⁴. During that time, Murray did gain some initial victories in the Sinai region, but suffered two defeats in Gaza, and oversaw the disastrous attempted capture of Baghdad. The British march to Baghdad turned into a retreat and eventually a siege at the city of Kut, ending with the surrender of 8,000 British soldiers—a defeat that British historian James Morris calls “the worst abject capitulation in Britain’s military history”¹⁵. In addition to being incompetent, Murray was largely sycophantic. Indeed, his staff edited the field reports from the surrender at Kut in order to alleviate Murray of any wrongdoing.

By contrast, Lawrence’s immediate supervisor, Colonel Gilbert Clayton, the Chief of Intelligence in Egypt, was ideally suited to deal with a personality such as Lawrence’s.

“[Colonel] Clayton made the perfect leader...he was calm, detached, clear-sighted, of unconscious courage in assuming responsibility. He gave an open run to his subordinates...he was loose, irregular and untidy, a man with whom independent men could bear”.¹⁶

Colonel Clayton and Lawrence were part of a small but vociferous clique of officers in the British intelligence section. At first glance, they seemed an eccentric sort, surely not cut in the military mold: Lawrence seemed interested in reading books in Latin and Greek; another officer took great pleasure in sculpture and art, while other officers were experts in economics and history.¹⁷ Yet these officers had a far greater handle on the Arab political and military situation than their superiors, and were clamoring for the British Army to aid the Arabs in a revolt against the Turks.

Their suggestions fell on deaf ears. For starters, Sir Archibald Murray did not want to have an Arab insurgent campaign competing with conventional British forces for prominence in his battle space. Moreover, even if Murray could be convinced to put his ego aside for a moment, he hadn’t the “ethnological competence” to run a guerilla campaign of Arabs.¹⁸ Apparently, Sir Archibald Murray was even worse at waging irregular war than he was at waging regular war.

Furious at this small clique of insubordinate officers, Murray decided to marginalize them. Using the “good-old-boy system”, Murray replaced Colonel Clayton with Colonel Holdich, his chief of intelligence from Ismailia (near the Suez), who placed Lawrence under close supervision, so as to keep him away from any Arab revolt.

¹⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sir_Archibald_Murray

¹⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Kut#Aftermath

¹⁶ Lawrence, Thomas Edward. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph*. 1926. New York: First Anchor Books, 1991. p. 57

¹⁷ Lawrence, T.E. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. p. 57-60.

¹⁸ Lawrence, T.E. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. p. 61

Lawrence would have none of this, and retaliated with some office warfare of his own. He took to incessantly correcting his superiors' grammar and insulting their collective intelligence level (which wasn't too difficult, he remarks). Following that, he asked for one to two weeks worth of leave. All too eager to be rid of this most troublesome, insubordinate and annoying officer for ten days, his superiors granted his request. Only Lawrence wasn't planning on rest and relaxation; he used his leave time to travel to modern-day Saudi Arabia to meet with Arab leaders in order to find a suitable leader for his revolt. He wouldn't have his campaign derailed by officers who were too incompetent and too apathetic to make it work. As Lawrence notes:

I justified [this insubordination] by my confidence in the final success of the Arab Revolt if properly advised. I had been a mover in its beginning; my hopes lay in it. The fatalistic subordination of a professional soldier (intrigue being unknown in the British army) would have made a proper officer sit down and watch his plan of campaign wrecked by men who thought nothing of it, and whose spirit it made no appeal.¹⁹

Departing in mid-October, 1916, his search took him to Rebeq (modern-day Saudi Arabia), where he met Feisul²⁰, Sherif of Mecca, later to become the first King of Iraq. Based on his knowledge of Arab politics and culture, Lawrence identified Feisul as the man around whom the Arabs would flock during the revolt.²¹ Lawrence, by virtue of his knowledge of Arabic (he could often pass for a native of Arabia), would serve as an advisor to Sherif Feisul for the duration of the revolt. Acknowledging Lawrence's special role in the struggle for Arab independence, Feisul gave Lawrence a set of Bedouin robes to replace his British Army uniform, which was largely unsuited for the desert.²² Lawrence recognized that the significance of the Arab robes gave him two distinct advantages. For starters, Bedouin robes allowed Lawrence to blend in with the rest of the Arabs during movement through the desert. Secondly, by wearing Arab robes, particularly the fine set of robes given to him by Feisul; he was able to gain the trust of the Arabs. However, this came at great risk. The Arabs would be forgiving of a faux pas committed by a foreigner in foreign clothes, but would be incredibly offended at a faux pas committed by a man in Arab robes.²³ Fortunately, Lawrence was familiar enough with the Arabs from his earlier travels through the Middle East so as to be largely accepted by the Arabs.

One of Lawrence's first tasks would be to re-capture the port base in the town of Yenbo (Saudi Arabia), along the Red Sea. Using conventional tactics, the Arabs were unable to take this base. Lawrence began to amend his tactics, realizing the value of the unconventional approach, much as insurgent tactics in the beginning of the Iraq War

¹⁹ Lawrence, T.E. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. p. 61-63

²⁰ Lawrence prefers to spell the Sherif's name as "Feisul". The more common spelling is "Faisal". For the purposes of this article, I will use Lawrence's spelling of Arabic names.

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 91.

²² *Ibid.* p. 126.

²³ Lawrence, T.E. "Twenty-Seven Articles". *T.E. Lawrence in War and Peace: An Anthology of the Military Writings of Lawrence of Arabia*. Brown, Malcolm. Greenhill Books, London. 2005. p. 145.

evolved from conventional attacks to more subtle guerilla raids. Lawrence abandoned his quest for Yenbo and set his sights on the port town of Wejh, a few hundred miles to the north. With the assistance of British naval gunfire support from the HMS *Hardinge*, Lawrence and the Arabs charged Wejh²⁴. The undermanned garrison put up little resistance as the Arabs captured the town.

Not surprisingly, following the capture of Wejh, Sir Archibald Murray made certain to publicly state how much he had always favored the idea of an Arab Revolt.²⁵

Shortly after the capture of Wejh, Lawrence fell ill with dysentery. As he lay in his tent for ten days, he began to reflect on the course of the Arab Revolt, the result of which was his famous work *Evolution of a Revolt*.²⁶ Though only a few pages long, it lays out the basic tenets and philosophies of modern guerilla warfare. Lawrence noted the large unwillingness of the Arabs to sacrifice their lives in pursuit of Arab Nationalism (after all, one had to still be alive to reap the rewards of freedom). He also noted that the Turks, sequestered in fortified forward operating bases, were essentially on the perennial defensive, and too few in numbers to effectively patrol and secure the vast deserts of Arabia. The Bedouin, on the other hand, accustomed to centuries of camel raiding, could rely on their vastly superior mobility, which could be aided and concealed due to a largely sympathetic Arab population and their ability to move much more easily through the Arabian terrain.

The Arabs would wreak maximum havoc on the Turks by attacking their supply lines—aided by British sappers, the Arabs learned to make improvised explosive devices, which they would use against the Hejaz railway, the lifeline of the Turkish Army. By conducting these small raids and ambushes and vanishing back into the vast desert, the Arabs placed themselves at little risk. Although they could not destroy the Turkish Army, they could hamper its ability to conduct offensive operations by keeping the Turks on the defensive in small forward operating bases, most notably the inexplicable and useless garrison around the city of Medina. The Turks may have controlled Medina, but they didn't control the vast expanse of Arabia, where most of the Arabs lived. Most importantly, the Turks, through their heavy-handed politics and cultural ignorance, could not hope to conquer that most unassailable fortress: the heart of the Arabs. The Turks utterly failed to grasp counter-insurgency warfare. They desired to face the Arab Revolt through decisive combat operations. This would be a task about as feasible as destroying a mist with a cannon²⁷.

It is difficult to overstate the significance that “Evolution of a Revolt” has for guerilla fighters. The book was carefully studied by Mao Zedong, and Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap was not only intimately familiar with Lawrence, but is said to have carried

²⁴ Lawrence, T.E. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. 162-164.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 167

²⁶ “Evolution of a Revolt” is the title generally given to an excerpt of Lawrence’s “Seven Pillars”. It has been reprinted and excerpted many times under different titles.

²⁷ Lawrence, T.E. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. 188-196.

Lawrence's account of World War I, Seven Pillars of Wisdom, with him into battle during the Vietnam War.²⁸

Lawrence's next move was to capture the Turkish base at Akaba (modern-day Jordan), a large, nearly impregnable port city on the Red Sea. Some in the British military wanted to land a force at Akaba, much like they did during the disastrous landing at Gallipoli. Lawrence noted that Akaba, while strongly fortified against approaches from the sea, was virtually unprotected from the landward side. For good reason, too, as the only way to approach from the landward side would be to cross hundreds of miles of desert. Certainly, no army would be crazy enough to attack Akaba from the landward side. Which is precisely why Lawrence set out to accomplish it—the element of surprise would be greatly on his side.²⁹ The march of the Arabs to capture Akaba was a rousing success—the seemingly impregnable fortress was captured intact with only two Arabs killed in the process³⁰.

With communications between Akaba and Cairo non-existent, Lawrence rode his camel across the Sinai Desert to Cairo, where he was met with good and bad news. The bad news was that Sir Archibald Murray had failed in his second attempt to take Gaza, based on orders given to him from British commanders and politicians in London. Even an officer as incompetent as Murray realized that Gaza could not be taken, but he lacked the fortitude to refuse London's request. From his desk in Cairo, and not from the field in Gaza, he ordered the attack. As a result, 5800 British troops died in yet another fruitless charge of the First World War.³¹

The good news was that Murray had been relieved of command and replaced with General Edmund Allenby (1861-1936), a famous cavalry soldier, fresh from the fighting in France. At first, Lawrence was apprehensive, assuming that Allenby was another typical British general of the World War I period. Lawrence was pleasantly surprised, though, that despite Allenby's adherence to conventional western doctrine of firepower and manpower, he had the mind of a British cavalryman--receptive to new ideas, and ready to throw out the old book, especially after witnessing the industrial carnage that characterized the attrition-based war on the Western Front of Europe.

To say that Allenby was open-minded was an understatement. When Lawrence returned to Cairo, he was still clad in his Arab robes, filthy from four months' of riding in the desert. He attempted to change into his British uniform, but was dismayed to discover that moths had ruined his clothes. Thus, he was forced to meet his new commander dressed in soiled and tattered robes and sandals. If Lawrence looked shabby when he wore British military attire, he must have been absolutely garish in Arab dress. (During the trek through the desert, his weight dropped below 100 pounds.) Although Allenby looked at Lawrence with bewilderment, he listened with great interest to what Lawrence

²⁸ Brown, Malcolm. "General Introduction." T.E. Lawrence in War and Peace: An Anthology of the Military Writings of Lawrence of Arabia. Brown, Malcolm. Greenhill Books, London. 2005. p. 44.

²⁹ Lawrence, T.E. Seven Pillars of Wisdom. p. 225-226.

³⁰ Greene, Robert. The 33 Strategies of War. Penguin Group. New York. 2006. p. 265.

³¹ Lawrence, T.E. Seven Pillars of Wisdom. p. 321.

had to say about the course of the revolt and the disposition of the Arab tribes of Syria. Allenby was particularly interested in Syria, as it housed the city of Damascus, the ultimate goal of both the British and the Arabs.³²

Allenby decided to fund Lawrence's rebellion with money, arms and supplies. For the next year and a half, Lawrence and Allenby would wreak havoc on Turkish forces. With Lawrence harassing the Turkish supply lines and thinning out the Turkish Army, Allenby was able to march through Palestine towards Damascus.

Lawrence knew that the Arabs had to arrive at Damascus ahead of the British for a variety of reasons. Not the least of which was because Lawrence knew that if the Arabs, under Feisul, entered Damascus first, they would be able to pacify the city so that the British forces would not be attacked as they entered. Lawrence believed that if the British were to enter the city first, the locals might have revolted, precipitating a battle between the British and Syrians that might have wrecked the city.³³

The Ottoman Turks fled Damascus ahead of the British, Australian and Arab armies, leaving pandemonium in their wake. Although Damascus greeted Lawrence and the Arab leaders with cheers and revelry, the city had no means of civil and social services, and rioting and looting was rampant. Historians debate the extent of Lawrence's involvement in restoring order, but he seems to have been integral to restoring electricity, sanitation, firefighting and hospitals, restoring many services within a matter of days.³⁴ While experts in the ivory tower of academia may debate whether or not the military is best suited to restore civil and social services to a city after capture, the argument is moot. In many instances, such as Damascus the military may be the only organization around with the manpower and equipment to restore civic order.

The question of government was relatively simple, as it was agreed that Feisul take control of Damascus upon their entry into the city. Additional civic figures were selected with care. Feisul had to be cautious to select individuals who were best qualified for civic duty, and not to reward wartime loyalty.³⁵ Lawrence astutely noted that "rebels, especially successful rebels, were of necessity bad subjects and worse governors. Feisal's [sic] sorry duty would be to rid himself of his war-friends, and replace them by those elements which had been most useful to the Turkish government".³⁶ Lawrence also did not discriminate against civil servants who served under the Turks, so long as they were competent civil administrators. It stands to reason that Lawrence was probably against the idea of "de-Turkification" as we might call it.

Lawrence's contributions to the British effort in World War I are undeniable, and had the British and French not split up the Arab lands with little regard to ethnic strife, his efforts might have led to a more peaceful and prosperous Middle East. Certainly, his creativity,

³² Ibid. p. 321-322.

³³ Ibid. p. 643.

³⁴ Mack, p. 166-174.

³⁵ Lawrence, T.E. Seven Pillars of Wisdom. p. 649-650.

³⁶ Lawrence, T.E. Seven Pillars of Wisdom. p. 649.

cultural competence, idealism, diplomacy and courage—both moral and physical—allowed the British and the Arabs to drive out the Turks.

Certainly, the parallels between the course of the Arab Insurgency of World War One and the Iraqi Insurgency of the early 21st Century are obvious. Fortunately, the US military was able to avoid catastrophe added more troops to their numbers, and pushed themselves off the massive forward operating bases and into the cities in order to effectively secure the population of Iraq. Just as the Turks typically ventured along the Hejaz railway in armored train cars during the war, only to fall victim to Lawrence's campaign of improvised explosive devices, so did the US military typically only venture out of the large Forward Operating Bases in armored vehicles during the pre-Surge era, again, falling victim to a massive IED campaign. Only timely intervention and a drastic change in military policy prevented the US from a fate similar to the Turks in the Middle East.

Lawrence and the Pentathlete

Lawrence possessed many characteristics that we would associate with the modern “pentathlete” concept of leadership, which is applicable to modern-day Fourth Generation Warfare. First, we must admire Lawrence's great creative genius, and his disregard for the prevailing wisdom of the day. He effectively discovered a method to avoid the stalemates that characterized the attrition-based trench warfare of the First World War. However, we must be aware that the great intuitive and creative skills we admire in Lawrence are often interpreted as their shadowy opposites. People of Lawrence's temperament are, to steal a term from pop-psychology, “right-brained”, and often tend to have difficulty conforming to the norms of a bureaucratic professional military organization. As a result, they may seem “careless”, as Lawrence's disheveled uniform suggested; “weird”, as Lawrence's obsession for reading books in their original Latin or Greek³⁷ might have seemed to other British officers; or worse yet, “insubordinate”, as Lawrence and his ideas of Arab Revolt must have seemed to Murray and his staff.

In a war characterized by tactics which did not advance with the pace of technological and social developments, Lawrence was a breath of fresh air, largely because he came into the war with no pre-conceived notions as to how war was to be fought, save for his education in the classics. He based his tactics on his extensive knowledge of the battles of ancient history, his thorough study of Crusader castles in the region, and on his reading—and general rejection—of the conventional military writers of the late 19th Century.

His intellectualism was in contrast with many prevailing attitudes within the British Army of the time towards unconventional thinking and higher education³⁸. Numerous studies have examined the anti-intellectual bias within the British military of the 19th and early 20th Centuries, noting that skill on the sporting field was preferred to any sort of

³⁷ Mack, p. 132-133

³⁸ Dixon, Norman F. *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence*. First Futura Publications. London, Britain. 1979. p. 161-165.

intellectual abilities³⁹, which certainly did not work in the favor of a man who prided himself on translating Homer and shied away from organized sports. So prevalent was the myth of the supposed connection between sports and battlefield prowess that there is a quote in Britain, often attributed to the Duke of Wellington, which claims that “the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton”. Indeed, anyone who has played the myriad of Ultimate Frisbee tournaments that dominate many professional military courses might be able to make the connection between the British Army and our modern-day one.

Anti-intellectualism seems to be a hallmark of many armies, particularly in peacetime. The US Army also fell victim to a cult of anti-intellectualism as well, particularly during the post-Cold War era. A 2007 New York Times entitled “Challenging the Generals” examines the case of two colonels who were steered away from higher education when they were junior captains. These officers recalled that they were given the impression that attaining higher civilian education was about as productive for their careers as “counting bed sheets in the Baghdad embassy”⁴⁰.

Fortunately, not all officers in our Army have heeded the advice of their superiors. Much as the education of those involved in the Arab Revolt helped the British succeed in organizing an insurgency during the Great War, so did higher education save America’s counter-insurgency efforts in the Iraq War. A handful of officers with higher degrees from civil institutions were able to influence military policy enough to allow the Surge strategy to succeed. The names of these educated officers are a “who’s-who” list of counter-insurgency, and their books (which would have been a point of contention for some in the British military who thought that officers shouldn’t write books⁴¹) have sold numerous copies all over the world—names like Gen. David Petraeus, Brig. Gen. H.R. McMaster, Col. Christopher Hughes, and Lt. Cols. John Nagl and Paul Yingling, all of whom hold at least a master’s degree, if not higher, in some sort of humanity or social science from a civil institution. These officers, and many others like them, developed a successful counter-insurgency model in Iraq, based in no small part upon their rejection of conventional wisdom, and their fields of study, which prepared them for the complexities of conducting counter-insurgency.

Lawrence also clashed with officers who grew up in the peacetime military, considering them unimaginative and inherently inflexible in the face of changing situations. He believed that the rigid discipline and conformity of the peace-time British Army suppressed reason and creativity, and were a detriment to the British or Arab fighting man in battle⁴². However, upon the outbreak of World War One, the British Army immediately began to accept hundreds of thousands of applicants for the service, which allowed them to reach into unconventional and previously untapped talent pools. Indeed,

³⁹ “The Uniformed Intellectual and His Place in American Arms”. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3723/is_200207/ai_n9097360 . Accessed 11 February 2009.

⁴⁰ “Challenging the Generals”. http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/26/magazine/26military-t.html?_r=1&pagewanted=5 . Accessed 11 February 2009.

⁴¹ Dixon, p. 112

⁴² Lawrence, T.E. Seven Pillars of Wisdom. The Seven Pillars of Wisdom Trust. Great Britain. 2003. p. 585-588.

prior to the outbreak of World War One, it seems that a large portion of British officers came from families with a heavy military tradition, which meant that they had been exposed to, and even been a part of, military discipline and culture their entire lives⁴³. A similar situation exists today. A number of articles have been written in the past few years referencing a cultural divide between junior and senior officers within the US Army. Much of this divide stems from the fact that today's junior officers have only known a wartime army. Compounding this is the fact that, like the British Army of a century ago, many officers in the Army come from military families: they've lived on Army bases and experienced the military culture their entire lives. Time invested in the military culture gives them greater commitment to the organization, and greater suspicion of perspectives which seek to alter it⁴⁴. Hence, the Army's personnel system, particularly during peacetime is probably the most anti-Darwinian system possible, as it seems to advance those who are the *least* responsive to change. If the Army wants to attract and retain more innovators, it must begin to both attract unconventional officers from previously untapped talent pools and from diverse backgrounds, and also expose our officers to a whole host of various educational and professional opportunities, so as to provide fresh ideas to succeed in Fourth Generation Warfare.

One of the biggest mistakes of the US Army was its failure to reward its unconventional and culturally competent officers, as evidenced by the poor treatment of foreign area officers in the early 1990s. In the book *Imperial Grunts*, journalist Robert Kaplan describes a foreign area officer serving in Mongolia, a recent convert from communism to democracy. This particular officer, fluent in Russian and intimately familiar with Russian (and Soviet client-state) culture after studying in Leningrad, was rated in the bottom 20% of his year group due to the fact that (he claims) he had "too much education and not enough infantry experience"⁴⁵. Verily, many of the would-be pentathletes of the early 1990s seem to have been sent to the unemployment office.

Which is a shame, because, as Lawrence demonstrated, cultural competence is vital when conducting "small wars". Lieutenant Colonel John A. Nagl, a contributing author of the US Army's *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, as well as a book on counterinsurgency entitled *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* (a nod to a famous quote from Lawrence), notes that intelligence officers in Iraq and Afghanistan are less concerned with their traditional roles analyzing the ranges of artillery and air defense systems as they are were with tribal loyalties, political motivations, and relationships. In this kind of war, good intelligence is everything⁴⁶.

Sun-Tzu once wrote that "reluctance to give rewards for intelligence is extremely inhumane"⁴⁷. Yet despite the role that human intelligence plays in counterinsurgency

⁴³ Dixon, p. 173.

⁴⁴ Nagl, John A. *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*. 2002. University of Chicago Press, Chicago. 2005. p. 202.

⁴⁵ Kaplan, Robert D. *Imperial Grunts: On the Ground with the American Military, from Mongolia to the Philippines to Iraq and Beyond*. 2005. New York: Vintage Books, 2006.

⁴⁶ Nagl, p. xiii.

⁴⁷ Sun-Tzu. *The Art of War*. Translated by Thomas Cleary. Shambhala Publishing. London. 1988. p. 168.

operations, many officers feel that the road to promotion does not lie in foreign area expertise. The highest ranks and higher levels of command are gained from operational fields⁴⁸.

In many professional military courses, junior officers are not informed of the various opportunities to get valuable experience outside of the typical operational fields. This might be for good reason, as once an officer declares that he would like to become, say, a foreign area officer, he cannot simply do a tour as a foreign area officer and then move back into a command track. He will be stuck in that field for the rest of his career and will most likely never command, nor would he advance as far in rank as officers in the operational track. In order to develop our pentathletes, we must permit a career path which fosters a broad range of skills.

Fortunately, in a round-about way, current operations in Iraq and Afghanistan force this learning upon our junior officers, much as Lawrence was thrust into the civil administration role in Damascus in 1918. Lawrence immediately realized the value in re-establishing essential civil services, such as fire brigades and electricity, much as our modern counter-insurgency Army has learned to do. With America's power, both military and civil, increasingly involving itself in fragile or failed states, where the influence of government does not readily exist and trans-national terror networks thrive, proficiency in establishing civil services as well as economic opportunities is just as vital for our current pentathletes as it was for Lawrence in November of 1918.

Lawrence was a prolific writer, and his contributions to the development of warfare have survived largely due to his writings and to his unintentional status as a pseudo-celebrity in Britain after the war. As we have noted earlier, the current generation of pentathletes have produced a number of books, some written based on wartime experiences, and some written as doctoral theses. However, the incredible information revolution of the 21st Century has provided for another method for information, thoughts and ideas to flow from the war zone into the homes of every-day Americans.

Lawrence is credited with saying that "the printing press is the most formidable weapon in the arsenal of the modern commander"⁴⁹. Indeed, in the 21st Century, when we talk about "strategic fires", we don't always mean about gunpowder and missiles, but rather, information. In fact, a common mantra of today's counter-insurgency planners is "lob ideas, not bombs". The analogy of information operations with artillery is a good one, in that when selecting the proper method of engaging a target audience, one must use almost the same planning considerations as an artilleryman selecting the proper engagement method for a target.

One of the greatest strategic Achilles' heels for the United States is American popular support. Consequently, we can apply our strategic fires in that direction. Our pentathletes can convey information to the American public in order to negate this particular weakness of American foreign policy. With an American public, particularly

⁴⁸ Richards, p. 69.

⁴⁹ Keane, Michael. Dictionary of Modern Strategy and Tactics. Naval Institute Press. 2005. p. vii

Generation Y, being increasingly internet-savvy, we can actually begin to encourage our Soldiers to blog on a regular basis in order to influence public opinion in the United States.

The military has had a shaky history with bloggers. Early in the War on Terror, the military seemed to be largely unaware of not only the information potential of blogs, but probably of the existence of blogs themselves. After a few well-publicized incidents of pictures and information making its way into the mainstream media, the military began a crackdown on blogs, which, by 2007, seemed to make blogging all but impossible. In fact, I can even remember hearing an instructor in some military course decrying “The Myspace”, and claiming that “The Myspace” would cause America to lose the war in Iraq. (I hate Myspace too, but it’s largely because of most of the idiotic users. But I digress.)

Fortunately, with new leadership in our military circles, we are not only seeing a tacit approval of blogs, but also their use as a strategic fire. The US Army Command and General Staff School in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, currently maintains a blog, which features, of all things, the Huffington Post on its blogroll. Lt. Gen. William Caldwell IV maintains a presence on this particular blog (and on *Small Wars Journal*) as “Frontier 6”, and encourages (and possibly even mandates) that his students maintain blogs of their own. The Command and General Staff College has even gone so far as to require that Army officers get “out of their intellectual comfort zone” and engage in public diplomacy among the American public by participating in question and answer sessions with various community groups.

Such activities not only provide great information (or “strategic fire”) for the American public, but it also gets our officers out of the military culture and forces them to challenge their beliefs about the role of the military in the world today, and also fosters the sort of diversity we require of our pentathletes.

The success of Lawrence should serve as a model to all officers conducting the trying business of counter-insurgency. Through this vignette, we have seen how officers who possess higher education, as well as creative, unconventional thinking, cultural competence, and skills in civil administration have been able to succeed. We’ve also seen how these characteristics can sometimes be shunned in professional armies. We would do best to recognize that, while these personality traits may not always be what one would typically associate with a military officer, they are vitally important to conducting Fourth Generation Warfare. We should do best to not only seek out and retain the officers with these traits, but to begin a massive program to develop these qualities within our ranks. For even though the United States had over one hundred thousand troops, massive air power, hundreds of billions of dollars, and free reign to pursue and kill any terrorist leader it chose, it was still failing at counter-insurgency. Only effective and enlightened leadership from pentathlete leaders saved the US Army from failure in Iraq. While success in future wars may not be a direct copy of our operations in Iraq, they will still require the same type of Soldier—those cut from the same mode as T.E. Lawrence.

Captain Crispin J. Burke is a UH-60 pilot with assignments in the 82nd Airborne Division and with Joint Task Force-Bravo in the Republic of Honduras. He is currently deployed to Iraq as a commander within the 10th Mountain Division.

[SWJ Magazine](#) and [Small Wars Journal](#) are published by Small Wars Journal LLC.

COPYRIGHT © 2009 by Small Wars Journal LLC.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, noncommercial use. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution– Non-Commercial – Share Alike 3.0 [License](#) per our [Terms of Use](#). We are in this together.

No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.

Contact: comment@smallwarsjournal.com

Visit www.smallwarsjournal.com

Cover Price: Your call. [Support SWJ here.](#)