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Counterinsurgency: Is “Air Control” the Answer?

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“Airpower is an unusually seductive form of military strength because, like modern courtship, it appears to offer the pleasures of gratification without the burdens of commitment.”¹

Within the last few years, many airpower theorists advocated for the creation of a more air-centric approach to counterinsurgency (COIN) warfare. They point to modern airpower successes as the central component in military strategies, such as the successes in Bosnia in 1995, in Kosovo in 1998, and in the air policing operations conducted over Iraq from 1991 to 2003.² Other airpower proponents decry the lack of “air-mindedness” and the short attention given to airpower in the 2007 United States (US) Army and Marine Corps Field Manual (FM) 3-24 *Counterinsurgency*. They call for a truly joint COIN doctrine that recognizes and leverages airpower’s combat capabilities instead of relegating its use solely to support for ground forces.³

Many of these arguments are reminiscent of the early airpower zealots who believed airpower’s emerging technical capabilities promised less costs in money, lives, and resources with equal or better results than the use of large armies. Airpower, however, is not a cure-all in COIN, as demonstrated by Britain’s foray into colonial policing from 1919 to 1939. These lessons are applicable today, as military leaders continue to explore alternatives and supplements to existing American COIN strategy in Afghanistan and Iraq. While there is no doubt airpower plays a prominent role within COIN strategy, airpower’s most prudent use should not be as a primarily offensive weapon but as a component within a restrained combined arms approach.

Before examining the use of airpower in British COIN operations during the inter-war years, it is important to briefly baseline the nature of COIN warfare. Field Manual 3-24 defines insurgency as “an organized, protracted politico-military struggle designed to weaken the control or legitimacy of an established government, occupying power, or other political authority while

¹ Thomas A. Keaney and Eliot A. Cohen, *Revolution in Warfare?: Air Power in the Persian Gulf*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1993), p. 213.

² Phillip S. Meilinger, “Counterinsurgency from Above,” *Air Force Magazine* 91, no. 7 (July 2008): 39, <http://www.airforce-magazine.com/MagazineArchive/Documents/2008/July%202008/0708COIN.pdf> (accessed on May 20, 2009).

³ Charles J. Dunlap, Jr., “Developing a Joint Counterinsurgency Doctrine: An Airman’s Perspective,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, no. 49 (Second Quarter 2008): 86-87, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=6&did=1482340621&SrchMode=2&sid=10&Fmt=6&VInst=PROD&VType=POD&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1242837355&clientId=3921> (accessed May 20, 2009).

increasing insurgent control” and quotes the Joint Publication 1-02 *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* definition of COIN as “military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat insurgency.”⁴ While sharing some common attributes, COIN differs from conventional conflicts. Counterinsurgencies call for a different mindset and military strategy, although the basic principles of war remain valid. They also require the concerted application of the diplomatic, informational and economic instruments of power to a much greater degree than the military instrument. Therefore, policy makers, planners and commanders must coherently define and understand the nature of the warfare before developing the operational design that seeks objectives linked to a coherent national strategy.

For almost 100 years, some COIN theorists attempted to embody insurgencies and COIN in an universally applicable model to any COIN operation. Every COIN, however, is different from another; there is no one formula guaranteeing success against every irregular adversary.⁵ Despite this fact, several commonalities emerged and are relevant in analyzing and defining modern COIN. According to David Galula, the center of gravity in any COIN is the indigenous population.⁶ As such, the oft cited imperative is to “win the hearts and minds.” Paramount is to secure the population, ensure law and order, and act in accordance with the law.⁷ All must be done with minimum and discriminate force. “Restraint in targeting and strike authorization [is] critical, as is reducing civilian casualties and collateral damage.”⁸ Further, COIN is heavily dependent upon accurate and timely intelligence, and understanding of the cultures, peoples and environment in which counterinsurgents fight.⁹ While necessary, kinetic operations should not comprise the totality of strategy, as civic action and security cooperation are crucial for denying legitimacy to the insurgency and building the host nation’s capacity to combat insurgency.¹⁰ These principles and considerations offer the lens for assessing the efficacy of British air control in COIN in the inter-war era and allow evaluation for application in Afghanistan and Iraq.

After World War I, economic constraints affected Britain’s ability to manage its colonial holdings with large ground forces. Simultaneously, the Royal Air Force (RAF) fought to maintain its independence from the army and navy. For these reasons, the RAF embraced “air control.” In 1932, *The Royal Air Force Quarterly* stated air control “is the use of aircraft as the primary arm to support the political administration...Aircraft usually act in cooperation with land forces which fill some ancillary...role...”¹¹ Air control provided a distinct RAF mission, while

⁴ Department of the Army, *The U.S. Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 2.

⁵ C. E. Callwell, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*, (London: Harrison and Sons, 1906), 32-33.

⁶ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006), 4.

⁷ Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, (New York; Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), 51-53.

⁸ Anthony H. Cordesman, “The Iraq War After Five Years: The Surge, Current Status, and Military Lessons (slide 52),” Center for Strategic and International Studies, www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/080317_5_year_iraq_war_final.pdf (accessed May 26 2009).

⁹ Paul Melshen, “Taking on Low-Intensity Conflicts,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 71, no. 1, (January 1987): 46, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=1&did=524384181&SrchMode=2&sid=1&Fmt=6&VInst=PROD&VTy pe=POD&ROT=309&VName=POD&TS=1242913069&clientId=3921> (accessed May 20, 2009).

¹⁰ Paul Melshen, “Mapping Out a Counterinsurgency Campaign Plan: Critical Considerations in Counterinsurgency Campaigning,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 18, no. 4, (December 2007): 669-673.

¹¹ E.J. Kingston-McCloughry, *Winged Warfare: Air Problems of Peace and War*, (London, U.K.: Jonathan Cape

promising reduced costs over ground troops in COIN. Central to air control was aerial bombing to disrupt and destroy villages to force the local populace to adhere to British mandates.¹² The RAF focused more on legitimizing itself and discovered airpower provided temporary effects.

For example in Iraq, the RAF conducted one such air control operation, where Arabs and Kurds initiated an insurgency against the British colonial administration. The insurgents were competent soldiers, as the vast majority served in the Ottoman Empire's military during World War I. They were successful in quickly overwhelming the British garrisons and depleted British personnel and resources. In 1922, the RAF took over military administration and the COIN campaign, promising reduced costs and allowing the British government to claim the withdrawal of British forces from Iraq. In reality, the British replaced them with capable Indian forces.¹³

Initially, the RAF policed Iraq through the use of punitive air expeditions to subdue the rebellious populations and enforce the collection of taxes. British theory on the maintenance of its empire required a heavy-handed approach, resulting in indiscriminate bombing of villages to attack rebellious tribes or insurgents. Eventually, the British public at home condemned air control policy as inhumane, forcing the RAF to modify its doctrine to use the minimum force necessary and warn villages of impending attacks to avoid unnecessary casualties. The revised goal was to disrupt daily life and coerce the villagers into denying support to the insurgency. In reality, the RAF paid lip service to the changes and failed to demonstrate the restraint implied.¹⁴

With regular punitive air expeditions, the RAF played down the fact that the majority of air sorties supported ground operations, and instead made the case that airpower could supplant ground forces in impeding colonial rebellions. The British maintained a large Indian and Iraqi force to respond to insurgencies, and air sorties typically supported these ground units. Critical air missions included flying reconnaissance, cover for convoys, and close air support. Often, the RAF's primary role in support of the ground forces was reconnaissance, and it effectively provided intelligence on insurgent activities and movements.¹⁵ While the RAF advanced the theory that airpower alone could occupy and pacify its colonial adversaries, in practice airpower was a only significant force multiplier when synchronized with ground operations. Air control by itself provided temporary effects and did not assist in the winning of hearts and minds.

As demonstrated in Iraq, and certainly reflected in the examination of efforts to control other colonial holdings, the British enjoyed mixed success with their air control operations in the 1920s and 1930s. As a cost saving measure, air control delivered. The British government claimed fewer personnel administered each colony to the British public. It was technically truthful in this assertion and achieved political support at home. Regardless of reduced costs, air control did not accomplish the RAF's stated COIN objectives without significant ground forces. The British hid the true costs of their COIN operations by trading British for Indian and Iraqi ground forces, thereby minimally changing the numbers of the Empire's actual forces on the

Ltd., 1937), 240.

¹² James S. Corum and Wray R. Johnson, *Airpower in Small Wars: Fighting Insurgents and Terrorist*, (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 51-66.

¹³ *Ibid*, 54-58.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 58-61.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 51-66.

ground. Despite espousing a change to a more humanitarian punitive air policy, “the primary criticism was that it was a blunt instrument...” that was not precise in its kinetic application.¹⁶ Blanket damage and casualties did not secure the support of the indigenous population against the insurgents. The biggest successes resulted from “indirect support to civil and military authorities through the movement of troops and material, aerial re-supply, reconnaissance, and psychological operations.”¹⁷ Finally, while the RAF proposed air control as the “method du jour” for all of the Empire’s colonial holdings, the army wisely eschewed the RAF’s primacy in the more urban and well-developed colonies and relegated air control to the more austere environments to avoid the possibility of insurgent information operations against the British.¹⁸

Understanding the requirements for effective COIN and the historical lessons from the implementation of RAF air control, it is interesting that prominent airpower theorists would offer airpower as an alternative to large ground forces in COIN strategy. Calling for a re-evaluation of the results of RAF air control operations, prominent airpower theorist Phillip Meilinger asserts,

*The role of airpower in COIN is generally seen as providing airlift, [intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance] ISR capabilities, and precision strike. This outdated paradigm is too narrowly focused and relegates airpower to the support role while ground forces do the “real” work. Worse, marginalizing airpower keeps it in support of ground-centric strategies that have proved unsuccessful.*¹⁹

He further contends air control is more politically acceptable to Americans than large ground forces in modern COIN.²⁰ Yet, the real question is whether air control can achieve US objectives and strategic end states. Meilinger fails to consider the nature of insurgency and COIN. If the center of gravity is the population and the population resides, operates, and identifies itself in the ground dimension, then it is foolish to assume the US can modify the nature of COIN warfare to that which it wants to fight and still succeed. Ultimately, “counterinsurgency is about human interaction and winning the support of the population. A population cannot be secured; its political, social, and economic concerns cannot be addressed; its forces or its personnel cannot be developed, advised, or trained, from 30,000 feet.”²¹ Insurgencies are by nature primarily ground-oriented; thus, effective COIN campaigns are primarily oriented in this manner as well.

This does not mean there is not an indispensable role for airpower in COIN. On the contrary, historical British air control operations and current operations in Afghanistan and Iraq reveal airpower’s value in an integrated restrained combined arms approach. While not the only airpower capabilities relevant to COIN, precision strike, ISR and airlift are critical contributions.

¹⁶ Ibid, 63-64.

¹⁷ W. R. Johnson, “All Thrust and No Vector?: Classical Airpower Theory and Small Wars,” In *No Clear Flight Plan: Counterinsurgency and Aerospace Power*, (Winnipeg: Centre for Defence and Security Studies, 2008), 125.

¹⁸ Corum and Johnson, 66.

¹⁹ Meilinger, 39.

²⁰ Ibid, 39.

²¹ James S. Corum, “On Airpower, Land Power, and Counterinsurgency: Getting Doctrine Right,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, no. 49 (Second Quarter 2008):

94, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=3&did=1482340611&SrchMode=2&sid=3&Fmt=6&VInst=PROD&VTpe=POD&RQT=309&VName=POD&TS=1242913144&clientId=3921> (accessed May 20, 2009).

Precision strikes, including close air support and deliberate targeting, are essential to pressuring elements of the insurgencies. However, air strikes must limit collateral damage and civilian loss of life; gaining and maintaining the population's support in COIN is fundamental.

Similarly and complementarily, airborne ISR is decisive for and synonymous with COIN. With the ability to provide persistent surveillance and fuse that data with other intelligence sources, ISR enables greater situational awareness and precision targeting by joint forces. A prime example of the importance of multiple, fused ISR disciplines coupled with precision strike in COIN was the 2006 operation against Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq. The airborne ISR effort represented more than 600 hours of development and fusion with human and signal intelligence, while the strike was enabled by special operations forces. The effort showed the "transformation in the relationship between operations and intelligence. Today, intelligence is operations"²² and is key to success in COIN. The air strike was not just an air success as some may contend, but it epitomized a joint military success with "Soldiers, Sailors and Marines working with Airmen."²³ The operation involved a highly complex fusion of air and ground efforts that achieved synergy and ultimately killed Al Qaida in Iraq's senior leader. The operation "provide[d] space and time to for wider stability operations to enable political solutions" to Iraq's insurgency.²⁴

Like precision strike and ISR, airlift is a critical enabler, providing sustainment, tactical mobility and vertical maneuver to disparate joint forces in both theaters. In Afghanistan, poor roads, enemy threats and difficult terrain make supply airdrops crucial for sustaining combat operations. Airlift dropped over 6.8 million pounds of materiel to ground forces in Afghanistan in 2007, up by 90% from 3.5 million pound in 2006.²⁵ In Afghanistan and Iraq, airlift is a valuable force protection asset that mitigates improvised explosive devices (IED) and other enemy actions against military convoys. In 2007, senior Air Force leaders estimated that airlift transported about 8,500 joint personnel and thereby reduced the number of convoys.²⁶ Since 2006 in Iraq, one US Air Force C-130 squadron "has taken the equivalent of 6,274 trucks (each lugging eight tons of supplies) and 5,467 buses (each with 40 passengers) off Iraq's dangerous roads, where they were vulnerable to sniper fire or attack from IEDs or car bombs."²⁷ Airlift significantly assists resupply while reducing the convoys required in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Undeniably, COIN presents a difficult problem set for the US and its partners. Airpower often becomes an attractive option to reduce personnel and resource costs. However, air control is not

²² Michael T. Flynn, Rich Juergens, and Thomas L. Cantrell, "Employing ISR: SOF Best Practices," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, no. 50 (Third Quarter 2008): 56, http://www.ndu.edu/inss/Press/jfq_pages/editions/i50/15.pdf (accessed May 20, 2009).

²³ General John D. W. Corley, "Modernizing Equipment to Fight the 'Long War'," (remarks made to the Capital Hill Club, Washington D.C., June 14, 2006), The Free Library, <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Modernizing+equipment+to+fight+the+'Long+War'-a0147568513> (accessed May 26, 2009).

²⁴ Flynn, Juergens, and Cantrell, 60.

²⁵ Anthony H. Cordesman, "Air Combat Trends in the Afghan and Iraq Wars (slide 13-14)," Center for Strategic and International Studies, www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/080318_afgh-iraqairbrief.pdf (accessed May 26 2009).

²⁶ Michael W. Wynne and T. Michael Moseley, "Fiscal Year 2008 Air Force Posture," (presentation to the Armed Services Committee, United States Senate, March 20, 2007), Armed Services Committee, <http://armed-services.senate.gov/statemnt/2007/March/Wynne-Moseley%2003-20-07.pdf> (accessed May 26, 2009).

²⁷ Mark V. Schanz, "The Airpower Surge," *Air Force Magazine* 92, no. 1 (January 2009): 32, <http://www.airforce-magazine.com/MagazineArchive/Documents/2009/January%202009/0109surge.pdf> (accessed May 26, 2009).

a panacea for COIN and cannot solve all the political, social, economic and military problems inherent in an insurgency on its own. When integrated into a larger scheme of joint operations, including land and sea power, airpower can be an effective and formidable force multiplier and enhancer. "... (A) 'comprehensive strategy is essential,' one in which airpower may prove 'a' decisive element in the overarching strategy as opposed to one in which airpower is 'the' decisive factor..."²⁸ In the final analysis, airpower makes ground operations more effective, especially in a restrained combined arms approach. Airpower is but one military piece of a complex COIN puzzle. Certainly, the best COIN strategy is the integrated synchronization and application of all of the instruments of power, both tactically and strategically, as part of a coherent strategy developed into an effective operational design to achieve desired end states.

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²⁸ Johnson, 124.

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