



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

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Is Armor Antithetical to Good COIN?

Frank G. Hoffman

Undoubtedly everyone has seen the recent report in the *Washington Post* on the introduction of a company of Marine M1A1 tanks into unruly Helmand province in Afghanistan.

Given the rugged terrain and complex nature of the ongoing operation there, the Marines will certainly get a moral boost out of having some armor protected firepower. Surely the Taliban is not happy about this new development unless someone's really trying for the proverbial 72 virgin martyrdom. Taliban elements will not be trying to sneak up on any isolated outposts that have a pair of tanks at the gate either. Ambushes will be more circumspect anytime a tank is escorting a unit. While many a SOF operator will tell you that the drone of an AC-130 overhead is sweet to his ears, the grunts will tell you that there is nothing like the crack and reach of a 120mm gun to keep the wolves at bay.

Some observers find the introduction of tanks to be inconsistent with US counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine from Field Manual 3-24. That is how the distinguished journalist James Fallows over at *The Atlantic Monthly* sees it. ("Destroy the Town to Save It"/James Fallows--*The Atlantic*) He writes about FM 3-24:

"everything about it was the antithesis of bringing in heavy tanks, bulldozing families off their land, and hoping for a positive payoff when they "connect" to the government by going to beg for relief. What can he and Mattis think of the effort they now oversee?"

I think Mr. Fallows, whose work I genuinely admire, is off base here with both the reference to FM 3-24 in particular and to the value of armor in COIN in general. He seems to be a victim of its caricature as some sort of socialized peacekeeping manual with Zen like principles. True, in COIN, "the best weapons often do not shoot," but some weapons must shoot if history is any guide. As a minor contributor to the drafting of the COIN manual, led by Generals Petraeus and Mattis, I never sensed that either was naive when it came to the nature of our enemies.

Mr. Fallows properly pillories an asinine comment by one anonymous official that a side benefit of having farmer's file for compensation for damaged fields is that it "connects them to their government." On target, but it's simply not true that FM 3-24 "and everything about it was the antithesis" of employing armor or dealing with extremists via kinetic solutions, when necessary. This was a thread repeated often in Chapter 1. True, the principle of minimal force was

underscored in the manual. Properly so, and I expect that the armor is going to be used with that historical principle in mind.

Nothing in the *Post* story supports "bulldozing families off their land" or suggests that armor is being / or will be used for that purpose. I have heard reports that the intense combat in Helmand is forcing some family dislocation, and some farms have been damaged. It is important to remember that the Taliban is well embedded in this area, and has had years to prepare his defense. It's hard to criticize commanders from afar, and I would assume that any damage is either incidental to operations or a carefully calculated requirement to minimize Taliban influence and local casualties in the long term. Mr. Fallows is absolutely correct that FM 3-24 highlights the need to avoid short term expedients in favor of a larger aim of influencing and securing the population. The notion that villages or farms might be destroyed as a trade off for improved local security is probably counterproductive and thus antithetical to good COIN practice. I'd give the commanders on the ground the benefit of the doubt until evidence to the contrary is offered.

The advantages afforded by properly used armor are numerous. The optics, sensors and main gun provide accurate, standoff firepower that is more direct and accurate than artillery. The tanks will be beneficial in providing additive force protection and a Guardian Angel for some dismounted units maneuvering in tough terrain where the geometry of employing artillery is a bit dicey. They will also be able to better screen major lines of supply and keep critical road networks open in mountainous terrain. They can also be useful in urban areas, for either deterring the foe or responding to a crisis where fast response is needed to preclude friendly casualties.

The principal benefit of the armor is psychological. FM 3-24 underscored the importance of perceptions and the "battle of the narrative." Part of that battle is convincing the bad guys that momentum is on our side, and "that all your tomorrows will be worse than yesterday." An escalation like bringing armor into theater is something the Taliban cannot match and will reinforce the perception that things can't go their way.

The *Post* story referenced a recent RAND report on this subject by a pair of veteran analysts (Dr. Dave Johnson and John Gordon). In their latest paper, RAND reviewed the employment of armor by British, Canadian, Danish, Israeli, and American forces in the past. The study shows just how useful armor has been in past cases of irregular and hybrid combat.

What emerges from the research to date is that each of these forces believes that there is a role in IW and hybrid warfare for heavy forces, including tanks, because they reduce operational risk, minimize friendly casualties, and provide an intimidation factor against adversaries.

That is a good summary of what I think is behind the new force request; *less* risk, *less* casualties and *less* gloat for our entrenched foe.

In short, I doubt that General Petraeus or General Mattis have tossed FM 3-24 out the window, even with the challenges posed by our persistent enemies in Afghanistan. Nor is it likely that

tanks will be misemployed in such a way as to undermine the legitimacy of U.S. actions or the Afghanistan government.

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