

Sisyphus and Counterinsurgency

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In Greek legend, Sisyphus was a king condemned by the gods to roll a huge rock up a hill only to have it roll down again for eternity. Students of counterinsurgency often feel like Sisyphus, as the United States Army continually resists institutionalizing counterinsurgency across the force, only to have to re-learn the lessons at a heavy price later before preparing to discard them again.

About a month ago, I was asked to deliver a short presentation to the Canadian Army on tactical counterinsurgency lessons learned over the past years in Iraq. What initially seemed like an easy task quickly became difficult as I synthesized the complex and varied experiences of US Army units into relevant and concise points transferrable to a foreign army. After a long night, I produced ten observations that reflect enduring lessons from Iraq that would resonate with military audiences. They are:

- *Learn from the past.*
- *Learn to ask understanding questions.*
- *Data is not understanding.*
- *Mass all of your resources to achieve the objective.*
- *Security matters.*
- *Population control is critical for success.*
- *Build human infrastructure alongside the physical.*
- *Understand perceptions matter far more than truth*
- *Communicate effectively.*

None of these are new, nor are they all inclusive, as significant areas are not covered. They do represent a start point for discussion about counterinsurgency operations at the tactical level.

1. *Learn from the past.* Our greatest failure of the past years was failing to read our own history. Effective counterinsurgent strategies have been well chronicled in the bookshelves of our military libraries, eloquently articulated by names such as Galula, Trinquier, Kitson, Thompson, McCuen, Paget, and many others.¹ A casual read of any of their works will reveal startling similarities to the current environment. Few of our “lessons” from Iraq and Afghanistan are new, but at the same time they are new within their particular context. It is professionally

¹ There are many competing counterinsurgency reading lists on the web, my favorite is posted at the blog “abu muqawama” <http://abumuqawama.blogspot.com/2007/10/great-counterinsurgency-reading-list.html>.

embarrassing that it took us over three years to develop a comprehensive approach to counterinsurgency in the field when many of the “lessons” were found on the bookshelves of the post library. We ought to visit the library as much as the gym or rifle range if we honestly want to succeed in this environment.² We must invigorate the intellectual side of our profession, and ensure our officers and NCOs are developing their brains as well as their brawn to produce the adaptable leaders required for the force.

2. ***Learn to ask understanding questions.*** Often our language limits our thoughts on the environment. Many leaders, upon assuming authority for a new zone, begin by asking, “Where is the enemy?” In most environments, this is the wrong question. A more effective initial question is “Where am I?” followed by “Why is the enemy here?” We have re-learned that focusing on the enemy without understanding how they are exploiting the operational environment to generate support impedes the development of comprehensive solutions. Once we understand the physical and human environment – essentially *why* and how the enemy is able to operate in a given area, effective solutions can be developed.

3. ***Data collection is not understanding.*** Effective analysis and success in counterinsurgency environments require granular level intelligence. Computer databases, patrol reports, human terrain systems, unmanned vehicles, SIGINT and HUMINT all compete for our attention and overwhelm our analysts. Too often, we become so focused on the latest metric regarding IED attacks, money spent on civil affairs, or number of local leader engagements that we forget to ask “so what?” Our intelligence organizations must be structured to facilitate understanding of the environment from the population’s perspective. They must answer *why* the enemy is there, and structure intelligence gathering accordingly. Often this kind of intelligence requires spending time on the ground and with the population. Engaging and employing our host nation partners can greatly ease this understanding gap, as it is their culture. Learning to ask the meaningful questions and understanding the answers from the population’s perspective aided us greatly in understanding how to reduce violence effectively.

4. ***Mass all of your resources to achieve the objective.*** Combat arms officers are trained in conventional war to mass fires at the decisive point. Great amounts of training are devoted to synchronizing infantry, armor, artillery, engineers, logistics, and other multipliers to seize an objective or defeat a military force on the field of battle. Sometimes we fail to synchronize our full spectrum of assets to achieve the goal in counterinsurgency environments. We must leverage and focus equally on lethal and non-lethal methods to achieve the desired effect on the population. We learned not to allow lethal and non-lethal operations to become de-synchronized. The population is keenly aware when we become de-synchronized between words and actions. The counterinsurgent’s actions must match the information operations narrative if the message is to be believed and acted upon by the population.

5. ***Security matters.*** Insurgents leverage insecurity to mobilize the population. This subsequently provides the insurgents with recruits, intelligence, food, shelter, medical, and monetary support. Unless we can protect the population of an unstable area continuously, they are unlikely to provide information needed by the counterinsurgent to combat the enemy. It is

² COL Peter Mansoor makes this superb point in his recent book “Baghdad at Sunrise” - “*In the future, U.S. Army officers must spend as much time in the library as they do in the gym, or risk defeat in this kind of war. ...*” p. 345

not unlike the U.S. inner cities where residents often refuse to cooperate with the police to eliminate gang or mafia corruption out of fear. To borrow from a recent book theme, the counterinsurgent must become the “strongest tribe” in the area.³ This usually means living or establishing a continuous and persistent local security presence. The population must feel confident and protected from insurgent intimidation and retaliation before they will finally come on the counterinsurgent’s side and deliver the critical intelligence needed to decisively defeat the insurgent and/or guerrilla cells.

6. *Population control is critical for success.* To defeat an insurgency that moves among the population, we must establish administrative and social controls to limit his movements.⁴ We must gain relevant understanding of who lives where, owns what, and to whom they are related. Measures such as forgery-resistant identity cards and vehicle licensing reduces insurgency’s mobility. In extreme circumstances, programs such as “gated communities” proved successful in de-escalating violence between factions.⁵ Portable computer databases and biometric measures have added greatly to our toolkit in the current conflict, identifying criminals and adding to human terrain databases. However, we have not undertaken basic census measures in Iraq and Afghanistan, which is puzzling given modern automation and biometrics which make the task easier than ever. How many SVBIEDs could be prevented by simple vehicle licensing and registration, backed by a system to “run the tags” at a checkpoint or VCP as any U.S. police officer would do? Population control measures make it nearly impossible for an insurgent to remain anonymous.

7. *Build human infrastructure alongside the physical.* Human infrastructure is more critical than physical infrastructure in counterinsurgency. The mechanics of rebuilding economic and physical infrastructure are well-known. Often overlooked is investment in human infrastructure. Looking at our success stories, stability in those cities was provided through effective local political and military leadership that was mentored and developed. When resurgent suicide bombers threatened to tear Tal Afar apart along sectarian lines in 2006 and 2007, local leaders such as the mayor and his police chiefs acted decisively to prevent retaliation and reduce tension.⁶ Once competent local leaders are developed, do not fail to provide adequate protection and security for these individuals as they become obvious targets.⁷ Respected local leaders make the difference between success and failure.

8. *Understand perceptions matter far more than truth.* Counterinsurgency is political conflict for power, and control of the population is the primary means to gain that power. History is

³ Quoted by Bing West in his 2008 book of the same name. He cites an Iraqi Army Lieutenant Colonel Ali in the aftermath of second Fallujah(2004) stating, “You Americans are the strongest tribe.” p. 60

⁴ See David Galula in “Counterinsurgency Warfare, Theory and Practice” pp. 81-85

⁵ Physically separating violent neighborhoods using a combination of walls and checkpoints was a key pillar in reducing sectarian violence in Baghdad during 2007-2008. It has also been applied earlier in other cities on a smaller scale.

⁶ Mayor Najim Abdullah Al-Jabouri represents what capable local leaders can accomplish when empowered. Unfortunately, Tal Afar government agencies still struggle to maintain legitimacy due to lack of resourcing from the Iraqi Government and a massive coalition troop reduction. Further information on the current situation in Tal Afar can be found at <http://ap.google.com/article/ALEqM5hPCpMCKe6t5d4pdtEuNSE-MDjM3wD92K65181>.

⁷ A prime example was of Sheik Sittar Albu Risha, founder of the Anbar Awakening movement. US forces went so far as to emplace tanks at the entrance to his house to protect this key leader. Ultimately, Al Qaeda managed to kill Sheik Sittar on September 13, 2007, too late to stop the movement he started.

replete with examples of counterinsurgents winning the tactical battles while losing the strategic campaign for the support of the host and home nations . We have learned that operations will be assessed through the lens of information effects. Information engagement is not a staff section's responsibility or an operations order annex, but a commander's program through which all efforts, lethal and non-lethal, must be viewed. Counterinsurgents must constantly ask, "What are the various audiences, and how will this action be perceived by each one? Then, ask what can we do to shape that perception to our advantage?" A successful counterinsurgent is proactive in shaping the information message of his actions. When reacting to events in the current media environment, speed and accuracy are key. To increase tempo, media engagement authority must be decentralized as much as possible out of theater and corps headquarters down to battalions and companies.⁸ Creating credible perceptions of increasing success and momentum are critical to re-establishing legitimacy and restoring the population's confidence and trust in the host government.⁹

9. **Communicate effectively.** We transmit, but how well is our message received, understood, and accepted? Too often we communicate using methods the populace doesn't understand or use in ways that undermine our message. Early on, we distributed Arabic language flyers into Turkoman-speaking populations, and wondered why our messages didn't resonate. Once we learned and understood how the host nation communicates, we used those streams, and our efforts improved markedly. In some areas messaging may best be carried out in tea shops, use newspapers in another area and local leaders in a third. Once we learned to communicate through appropriate mediums in the host nation our successful results multiplied. We learned to place local figures at the forefront. A local citizen is always more credible than a foreign one in any setting. Many Iraqis believed "Baghdad Bob's" fantastic tales of victory *because he was an Iraqi.*¹⁰

10. **Work through the host nation.** This most basic of counterinsurgency tenets is often the most disregarded. Working with allies of varying levels of integrity and competence is sometimes a challenge. It is the host nation's war, and only they can win it for themselves. Acting unilaterally on any line of effort undermines the overall goal of building host nation capacity and responsibility. We learned to work through transition teams to develop the host nation forces. We learned it was the conventional unit's responsibility to mentor and train local forces, and build their confidence. One of the most transformative decisions I witnessed was when my commander, LTC John Tien, mandated that every combat patrol be executed jointly with local forces. The howls of protest were audible from the commanders, including myself.

⁸ Reference Combined Arms Center Commander LTG William Caldwell IV's 2008 article "Changing the Organizational Culture" located at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2008/01/changing-the-organizational-cu-1/>. LTG Caldwell states bluntly, "Responding to this challenge requires changes in our approach to warfare. The one thing we can change now does not require resources – just a change in attitudes and the organizational culture in our Army."

⁹ Identified in the March-April 2008 *Military Review* article "Anbar Awakens: The Tipping Point" http://usacac.army.mil/CAC/milreview/English/MarApr08/Smith_AnbarEngMarApr08.pdf by the author and COL(P) Sean MacFarland. Borrowed from a concept outlined by COL (ret) Rick Everett.

¹⁰ "Baghdad Bob" was Mohammed Saeed al-Sahaf, the Iraqi Information Minister known for such statements as "Their infidels are committing suicide by the hundreds on the gates of Baghdad. Be assured, Baghdad is safe, protected." At the same time, US forces were in control of Baghdad Airport. He was believable enough that many Baghdad residents were shocked to encounter US forces in the capitol shortly after.

We regarded the local forces as a hassle, inept, and security risks. Looking back, LTC Tien's bold and unpopular action did more to secure the city than any other single decision. After months of working alongside our forces, local forces achieved some stunning successes which enabled the transition of security to the lead of the host nation. We learned in many respects the host nation is often more effective than our own forces in creating lasting security.¹¹

These examples reflect just a fraction of the durable knowledge gained over the past years. Looking at these lessons reveals trends, such as the criticality of developing an accurate environmental understanding, securing and engaging the populace, communicating effectively, working through the host nation, and unity of effort. The need to prepare for asymmetric conflicts has been clearly articulated by our national leaders.¹² We must carefully survey the lessons learned over the past years and make concrete and lasting changes to the educational and training base. As of the time of this writing, the United States Army has not systemically mandated the teaching of counterinsurgency principles in our officer and non-commissioned officer professional military education institutions. Where it is implemented, it is at the initiative of local commanders, leaders and instructors that recognize the relevance of preparing soldiers for the current environment. This instruction should take place alongside traditional instruction on conventional warfare competencies. We owe it to the service members who have sacrificed so much to institutionalize the lessons of Iraq to prevent a repeat of the "great amnesia" that occurred in the three decades following Vietnam. To do less is tantamount to professional negligence, and condemns the next generation to repeat our mistakes. Perhaps we can relieve Sisyphus of the burden of rolling the counterinsurgency rock up that hill one more time.

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¹¹ T.E. Lawrence's full quote from "Twenty Seven Articles" is "*Do not try to do too much with your own hands. Better the Arabs do it tolerably than that you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are to help them, not to win it for them. Actually, also, under the very odd conditions of Arabia, your practical work will not be as good as, perhaps, you think it is.*"

¹² "*We can expect that asymmetric warfare will be the mainstay of the contemporary battlefield for some time ... Success will be less a matter of imposing one's will and more a function of shaping behavior of friends, adversaries and, most importantly, the people in between.*" – Secretary of Defense Robert Gates at Kansas State University, 27 November 2007

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