

Killing Your Way to Control

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“Effective counterinsurgency provides human security to the population, where they live, 24 hours a day. This, not destroying the enemy, is the central task¹.”

This article will assert that this and other similar statements are categorically wrong, false and misleading. These types of statement have been constantly reinforced with another common assertion, that in “counter-insurgency” you “cannot kill and capture your way to success”. Regardless of additional context, such as “you do have to kill some insurgents” the basic belief is that killing and capturing should not be the focus of military effort.

Such statements have undermined years of proven wisdom, and have created an environment that demonizes the logical mind, and demeans the discussion of military affairs into a self-serving sophistry, that falls short of providing clear and explicit guidance to officers and men.



Sergeant Anthony Battles (left), Bravo Company, 1st Reconnaissance Battalion, 1st Marine Division (Forward), engages the enemy during a firefight in Northern Trek Nawa, Afghanistan (ISAF)

Using lethal force to break their collective will to endure in combat

defeats any type of armed opponent in any environment. Lethal force is the most effective and efficient method of breaking collective will. As Clausewitz made clear, killing does not set forth or resist the policy, but rather removes the violent armed objectors that seek to counter it.

In general terms killing the wrong people (civilians) may undermine the political objective being sought. Whether it does or does not will be the policy context. How proportionately, precisely or discriminately lethal force is applied will be dependant on the tactics employed. Thus Rules of Engagement (ROE) are those limitations on lethal force and military activity that armed forces use to ensure that force does not undermine policy.

The reason that the British Army is deployed on operations in Afghanistan is because there is an armed opposition to the government of Afghanistan, collectively described as the Taliban and/or Al Qaeda. Thus, were it not for that one condition, (the armed opposition) the British Army would not be there, in any significant number. Remove the armed opposition and the need for the British Army to be deployed simply goes away.

Thus at the campaign level, the Army’s mission should be to defeat the insurgents, as in breaking their collective will to endure in combat. Defeating the enemy creates your freedom of action to do all else. It does not matter if the Government policy is to ensure that everyone has a red front door. An Army’s job is to kill or capture anyone who seeks to violently contest the colour of the front door. Non-violent opposition is normal everyday politics, and not something that the Army should worry about, but more of that later.

As logical as this may seem, The British Army has chosen to believe something very different. As of November 2009 UK doctrine stated,

The primary role of the military is to provide sufficient security for the

people and control over the operating environment. Security cannot be achieved solely through the presence of military forces, or just by killing or capturing adversaries. Unlike in general war, the objective is not the defeat or destruction of the enemy, but neutralisation of a threat to stable society.

Para 456 of JDP 3-40

This is problematic. Why does neutralize mean something other than killing or capturing? How it is possible to “neutralize” an enemy without subjecting them to effective attrition? In 2005 ADP Land Ops stated,

Neutralizing the insurgent and in particular the leadership forms part of a successful COIN strategy. Methods include killing, capturing, demoralising and deterring insurgents, and promoting desertions. This is an area in which military forces can specialize and should be a focus for COIN training. The aim should be to defeat the insurgent on his own ground using as much force as is necessary, but no more.

Para 0156 e, ADP Land Ops AC 71819

This was useful guidance of the highest order. This is in sharp contrast to “*The primary role of the military is to provide sufficient security for the people and control over the operating environment,*” and then add “Security cannot be achieved solely through the presence of military forces, or just by killing or capturing adversaries.”

Essentially JDP3-40 tells us that the primary military role of providing sufficient security and control cannot be achieved by prosecuting the activity for which armed forces exist. Why would killing and capturing enough of the enemy not provide sufficient security? What changed between May 2005, when ADP land Ops had it just about right, and November 2009, when nothing about the character or conflict or even insurgency had in any way changed? To suggest it had runs the risk of a statement unsupported by any historical or even operational evidence.

All the new counter-insurgency theorists

concede, “Some killing is required” but to quote FM3-24 “—while necessary, especially with respect to extremists— [killing] by itself cannot defeat an insurgency²”. Again this makes no sense, unless as part of a defence mounted to preserve the idea that “you cannot kill and capture your way to success.” Those who are “extremists” do not become apparent or may not even exist until the ranks of the enemy have been thinned by death, desertion and surrender. Until lethal force is focused on the enemy, the extremists may not be apparent, and who is and is not an “extremist” is irrelevant if they are clearly armed and thus a legitimate target within the ROE.

Killing and capturing are important, because lesser forms of operation aimed at “disrupting” or “dislocating” while useful, may allow the enemy to survive. Dead and captured cannot return at some later date to re-contest any issue they see fit. Warfare against irregular forces is won in a similar way to warfare against regular forces. The only major differences is that force usually has to be employed far more precisely, discriminately and proportionately. This is because lethal force will be applied close to or within a population that you are politically/legally required to protect. The other difference is that lethal force will be focussed at the individual level. This is a general distinction from that of fighting regular forces where operations would seek to defeat units and formations in part or as a whole.

It is somewhat pointless to keep stating the truth of this matter, so perhaps it is more useful to examine why the logic and historical evidence has been rejected in favour of doctrines with no evidential basis.

Existing Wisdom

Firstly it is important to note that success against insurgents and guerrillas has nearly always been delivered by effective attrition. General Templar made it very clear in the 1958 edition of the *Conduct of Anti-Terrorist Operations in Malaya* that,

“The job of the British Army out

here is to kill or capture Communist terrorists in Malaya³”.

What success the British Army gained in defeating rebels between 1945 and 1975 was firmly rooted in killing and capturing the enemy. This was done in line with very specific conditions, the most important of which was the rule of law. Simply put, the rule of law is how a government expresses control over the territory it governs.



General Templar in Malaya – Daimler Armoured Car

It would be absolutely correct to point out that a great many British Army operations in Ulster were aimed at disrupting terrorist activity but this was almost always military activity focussed on the enemy that for the most part remained undetected and this acted in concert with the vast amount of effort went into efforts to identify and convict terrorists of terrorist offences. It could also be suggested that a significant proportion of military activity, such



British soldier during a patrol in Newry

as patrols may have served no useful purpose.

Regardless of semantic academic definitions, historically and in terms of the UK, “terrorists” were terrorists because they were breaking the law. They conducted criminal (terrorist) acts within a jurisdiction. It was utterly irrelevant if that criminal act was a platoon-sized raid on a police station or an act of arson. Law and order were what protected the population, regardless of terrorist activity. In this context, “protecting the population” should not be the activity, but should be the benefit gained from destroying the enemy.

British success in ensuring that transition from colonial rule to self-rule, took place via peaceful means was usually and most successfully delivered by militarily defeating the insurgencies that sought to do otherwise. In 1967 Colonel Julian Paget outlined five essentials for counter-insurgency operations. These were⁴:

- Civil-military understanding
- A joint command and control structure
- Good Intelligence
- Mobility
- Training

Military operations were aimed at destroying the enemy, who would otherwise make governing the people, via the effective rule of law, impossible. Once that was agreed, most of the other military effort was put into ensuring that troops could find and kill the armed enemy. Almost everything Paget wrote in 1967 is applicable to Afghanistan today. Despite popular utterances to the contrary, nothing much has changed since that time. Certainly nothing that would degrade the importance of the five items outlined.

Mowing the Grass

Mowing the grass is a common aphorism that implies killing insurgents does not lead to success, as in you mow the grass and the grass grows back. Officers adhering to this view suggest that

success is gained by “influence.” To quote,

“However we are also of the view that whilst placing the population at the centre of thinking is easy enough to say, it is not enough to then pursue a largely kinetic approach or to think that killing increasing number of insurgents guarantees success. Whilst this last point is now widely understood and by and large commanders – at all levels – seek to avoid its consequences (predominantly civilian casualties and collateral damage) what has not been applied effectively is the means by which that same population will be cajoled, persuaded, informed, reassured and convinced.”⁵

There are two issues to address here. The first is that if your “kinetic” operations are killing too many civilians, then something is lacking in terms of the skill to conduct operations. Tactics are bad. The second is that military action is only ever supposed to destroy opposing military force. In short, if you are skilled at it, then killing insurgents does not place the population at risk, and does bias your chance of success more than any other action. Clearly sometimes civilians die, as they did even in Ulster, because soldiers are fallible, but training and ROE goes a long way to addressing this. If the logic is that killing the enemy kills civilians, then something is wrong with the conduct of military activity.

Moreover it is not the Army’s job to “influence the population”. It is the Army’s job to influence the enemy by telling them to give up or die violently. Influence is the power to alter beliefs and/or behaviour. As stated, armies exist to alter the behaviours of other armies, or armed factions. If they are seeking to influence civilians, then they are engaging in political activity on behalf of the Government. Seeking to “influence” civilians is not something armies should seek to do. In fact the reason an Army should be seeking to destroy terrorists or insurgents is

because they seek to influence the population. Influence is clearly the problem, not the solution. It would seem logical to focus effort upon the perpetrators not the victims.

Killing civilians should be avoided, not because it is morally or ethically wrong to do so, but purely because, due to the rule of law, those civilians are under your protection. You should not kill your own civilians, as you would not kill your own forces. As previously admitted, mistakes happen, and if those mistakes are continuous and cumulative then those doing the killing clearly lack skill.



South Vietnamese Ranger inspects VC dead (IWM)

The origins of “Mowing the Grass” are obscure, in terms of why someone would come to believe something so clearly illogical. Correctly conducted body counts should give a very accurate idea of how many insurgents are being killed. Given the low quality of the enemy in Afghanistan, as concerns weapons and manpower, there should simply be no military competition whatsoever. The enemy’s light weapons all date from the 1960s or earlier, and they lack useful military training, command, or any effective equipment in comparison to British Army current issue. For example, they lack effective night fighting and communications capability. Open sources suggest that they only rarely operate in large numbers. Put simply, the British

Army should be winning every contact and thus able to gauge accurately the number of enemy killed via recovered bodies, captured personnel and weapons.

As in Malaya, the object of military operations should be to hunt the enemy into extinction. This is not to suggest that this is easy. It is not. Climate and terrain alone make it incredibly demanding, but demanding as it is, the objective is a very simple one. If you are really killing the enemy day on day, with captured weapons supplying the proof of a legitimate and armed threat, then sooner or later the enemy’s will to endure will be broken. No enemy has unlimited manpower⁶. If the enemy is infiltrating into your operational area from a huge population in another country or province, then that has to be stopped. This is obvious, and has to be done. The British Army knows exactly how to do it. If resources are not available for this activity, then to what more important activity are resources being allocated?

The Population is not the Prize

The population is not the prize. The population are the spectators to armed conflict. The prize is the control the government gains when the enemy is dead and gone. Control only exists when it is being applied, and it exists via the rule of law. The population will obey whoever exercises the power of law over them. Power creates support. Support does not create power. This is the source of great confusion.

The Soviets exercised near-genocidal levels of violence against the Afghan population, as did the Nazis in occupied Russia. Neither was attempting to create an environment where the rule of law prevailed. Control was sought via threat of harm to the civilian population. No one supports people who seek to harm them. Law as in control and stability, is where crime (including terrorism) is punished and justice functions effectively enough, to enable people to live safe and productive lives. Creating and sustaining that condition requires someone to have monopoly of the use of lethal force. People will support who

ever has the power to effectively enforce the rule of law. Gaining the monopoly on lethal force requires the destruction of the competition. Merely being present is not enough. In violent competitions, power gains support and not vice-versa.



Bernard Fall lunches with US Army troops in Vietnam (US Army)

Thus it is a mistake to re-state Bernard Fall's flawed logic that "a government that is losing is not outfought, but is out-governed." Winning gains you control, and that control requires that you defeat the enemy. If you lose, you have been outfought.

The British Army should provide an environment where law exists, because it is uncontested by another armed force. The primary military role is to destroy and defeat any entity seeking to contest the rule of law, through violence. The British Army does not provide the rule of law. It merely ensures that the existing law functions because is not contested through violence, because they threaten

violence in return to those who contest it.

The population should not be asked to pick sides. They should merely be informed that the Army will win, and that should be demonstrated to them, as forcefully and unequivocally as possible. No one should be confused that if you fight the Army/Security Forces, you will die or be captured. Evidence should be literally laid before them. There should be no more complicated message than that.

If some of the armed members of the population pick the wrong side, then so be it. Another common issue raised in defence of a seeking a greater cultural understanding is that of the risk of "blood feuds." This is nearly always mooted in terms that unnecessary lethal force creates unnecessary enemies, as in killing one insurgent somehow creates more. This idea rests on a great many unexamined assumptions, and almost no actual evidence. It may have happened. So what? Tribal peoples who are familiar with the blood feud idea do not use its existence as an objection to violence.

The Enemy

As far as the enemy is concerned, killing, as in killing British soldiers, works. The Taliban are grateful for the political impact that the "Wootton Bassett effect" creates. This is not to speculate as to what casualty rate would cause the British Government to withdraw UK forces from combat operations in Afghanistan, but killing soldiers is the most proven method by which any irregular enemy can break the will of a western government. The US was forced to withdraw from Vietnam, the Lebanon, and Somalia because the collective political will to maintain combat

operations evaporated when casualties became politically unsustainable.

There is nothing radical, original or insightful in any point made so far. The rule of law for the protection of the population is the objective, but it is not the activity sought. The destruction of the enemy is the activity that delivers the objective.

Health Warning

This article has slaughtered some much loved sacred cows because there is no merit in their continued existence. They have cost blood and treasure that would never have been spent had simple achievable missions focussing on the destruction of the enemy been the primary reason for deploying armed force. □

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1. Page 486 "The Accidental Guerrilla," David Kilcullen
 2. Paragraph 1-14 FM3-24
 3. Tellingly his exact wording was taken from the first edition in 1952
 4. Page 157 Counter Insurgency Campaigning, Julian Paget
 5. Page 14, Behavioural Conflict From General To Strategic Corporal: Complexity, Adaptation And Influence, Andrew Mackay and Steve Tatham
 6. One officer recently commented to this author that he felt that the British Army was killing about 50 Taliban for every British soldier killed. This ratio is not impossible. The UK and Commonwealth Forces achieved about 52:1 ratio against the Mau Mau between 1952-60. However the Mau Mau were extremely poorly equipped with little or no IED or HE capability. Based on a current UK KIA figure of 310 (at time of writing) since 2006 this would mean, about 15,500 Taliban KIA, in 6 years (2,580+ per annum) in the UK operations area alone. If this ratio is extrapolated to include the US, at 954 over the same period then this is another 47,700 enemy dead, meaning a combined total of 63,200 in 6 years, or 10,500 per year. Does this seem likely?