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## A LESSON FROM RWANDA

### CIVILIAN CASUALTIES IN COUNTER INSURGENCY

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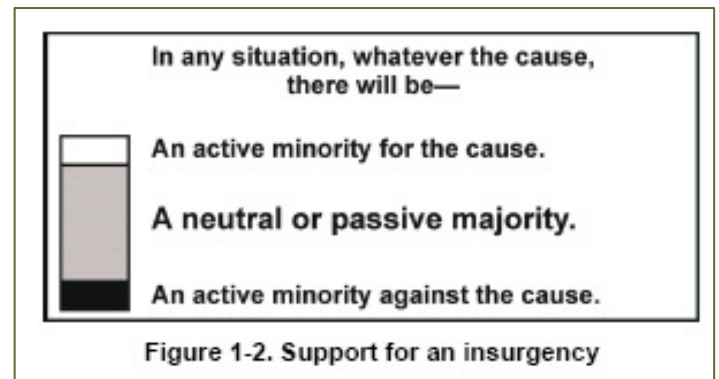
Civilians on the battlefield in counter insurgency are not only part of the battlefield; they are the objective. There are no collateral casualties. All non-*insurgent* casualties are friendly.

I wrote that short statement last year as a lesson learned from my experiences in Rwanda.<sup>1</sup> Since then I have had the opportunity to use that paper as a framework for briefing military officers and non-commissioned officers on the subject of counter insurgency (COIN) with Rwanda as a case study. In giving that brief, the above sentence drew the greatest reaction from the audience, some positive and some negative. On the positive side, a friend, recently returned from commanding a field artillery battalion in Iraq, remarked, "I have never heard anyone put it that way. That makes me think and that's good..." On the other hand a more senior officer deeply engaged in the doctrinal aspects of COIN (and with a year of brigade command in Iraq under his belt) responded, "I hope you don't think such a rule applies to our strike on Zarqawi..." I replied that I did and I still do. Here's why.

### THE PRIMACY OF THE POPULATION IN COIN

In the spectrum of conflict, COIN is different in that it centers on the struggle for the population. Simply put COIN is a popularity contest between insurgent and counterinsurgent to win the support of the

<sup>1</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Thomas P. Odom, USA (ret), "Guerrillas From The Mist: A Defense Attaché Watches the Rwandan Patriotic Front Transform from Insurgent to Counter Insurgent," *Small Wars Journal Magazine*, Volume 5 July 2006.



population. **FM 3-24 Counter Insurgency** captures this idea in graphic form.

### FIGHTING THE INSURGENCY, NOT THE INSURGENT

This is not a new concept. T.E. Lawrence addressed this issue in his paper, "Evolution of a Revolt, saying, "Rebellions can be made by 2 per cent. active in a striking force, and 98 per cent. passively sympathetic." <sup>2</sup> This concept is fundamental to the idea of fighting the insurgency rather than fighting the insurgent. Fighting the insurgency means winning the support of the neutral or passive majority. Fighting the insurgent centers on killing insurgents and destroying their will to continue the fight.

<sup>2</sup> T.E. Lawrence, "The Evolution of a Revolt," *Army Quarterly and Defence Journal*, United Kingdom.

In Rwanda, the former government took an extreme approach in focusing on the insurgency: the genocide set out to destroy not only the active minority supporting the insurgency but also anyone in the majority who remained openly neutral or passive. As a result, the hardliners polarized the ethnic issues and much of the majority went into exile with the hardliners as the government lost militarily. Over the next 2 to 3 years, the new government gradually set the stage to reestablish a semi-neutral majority and then coax that majority into supporting the former insurgents. It was not a smooth process; in the Kibeho Internally Displaced Persons Camp massacre, the new Rwandan military got too centered on catching or killing genocidal killers and some 2000 Rwandans died in the melee. Ultimately the new government took military action to break the hardliners' hold on the refugee camps and allow the survivors to go home. In that operation, the new Rwandan military remained focused on the population, not the enemy.<sup>1</sup>

In COIN, focusing on killing or capturing the enemy is the strategic or operational equivalent of target fixation, an injection of conventional warfare in an arena of unconventional conflict. That is not to say counter insurgent forces should not destroy insurgents when the opportunity or the need so dictates. Rather as indicated by Dr. David Kilcullen in his "28 Articles"<sup>2</sup> the counter insurgent force should pursue its own objectives and "only attack the enemy when he gets in the way. Try not to be distracted, or forced into a series of reactive moves, by a desire to kill or capture the insurgents." Dr. Kalev Sepp describes this

<sup>1</sup> Thomas P. Odom, *Journey into Darkness: Genocide in Rwanda* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Dr. David Kilcullen, "Twenty-Eight Articles, Fundamentals of Company-level Counterinsurgency."

phenomenon in his "Paradoxes of COIN"<sup>3</sup> with three consecutive bullets:

- The more force you use, the less effective you are
- Sometimes doing nothing is the best reaction
- The best weapons for COIN don't fire bullets

In cataloging dysfunctional COIN efforts, Sepp lists, "priority to "kill-capture" enemy, not on engaging population" as a key indicator for unsuccessful COIN operations. In my own experiences in post-genocide Rwanda, I saw first hand the delicate balance necessary between the use of force against insurgent killers and reconciliation within Rwandan society. Put bluntly killing perpetuated killing.<sup>4</sup>

## FIREPOWER AND COUNTER INSURGENCY

It is axiomatic that firepower coupled with ever advancing technology is the basis for the American Way of War. The principle that firepower substitutes for manpower has served us well in conventional wars. Technology has allowed us to increase the lethality and precision of that firepower; this trend has over time reduced the size of deployed forces on the battlefield on the ground, at sea, and in the air. And this equation of tactical, operational, and strategic dominance has worked effectively in all realms of conflict with the exception of COIN. Going back to Dr. Sepp's paradoxes, "the best weapons for COIN don't fire bullets."<sup>5</sup> In

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Kalev Sepp, "Best Practices in Counter-Insurgency," Presentation at the 2006 Association of the United States Army (AUSA) Convention, Washington DC, 10 October 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Both Kilcullen and Sepp's writings are used heavily in Chapter 1, FM 3-24.

<sup>5</sup> Sepp.

war for the support of a population, dead men cast multiple votes through their survivors.

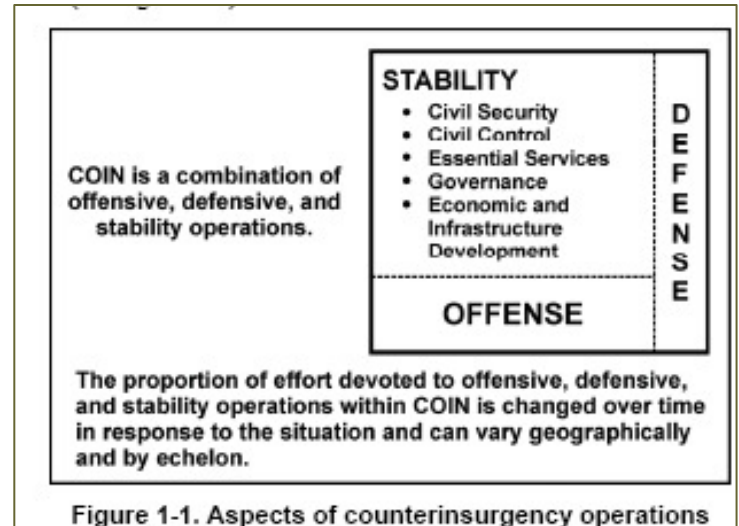
The relationship between the target population and COIN has implications at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war. Before such a relationship can be understood, one must first decide that a counter insurgency is in play.

*From Paragraph 1–9 FM 3–24:*

Clever insurgents strive to disguise their intentions. When these insurgents are successful at such deception, potential counterinsurgents are at a disadvantage. A coordinated reaction requires political and military leaders to recognize that an insurgency exists and to determine its makeup and characteristics. While the government prepares to respond, the insurgents gain strength and foster increasing disruption throughout the state or region.

Historically that has often been a problem. Our own recent experience in Iraq documents just how difficult it may be to define what type of war we are fighting. More than a few in the international community or even inside Rwanda did not see the signs of a new insurgency threatening post-genocide Rwanda until the new Rwandan military captured an insurgent base on an island in Lake Kivu 17 months after the July 1994 ceasefire. Even our recent efforts to define doctrine suggest we are not comfortable with the concepts of COIN, stability and reconstruction operations, security operations, or full spectrum operations. **FM 3–24** offers this graphic description of COIN at right

All of this assumes we have defined the conflict as COIN. I have already indicated that is not an easy task. We are not alone. Israel



*In explaining this graphic FM 3–24 states:*

**1–105.** The purpose of America’s ground forces is to fight and win the Nation’s wars. Throughout history, however, the Army and Marine Corps have been called on to perform many tasks beyond pure combat; this has been particularly true during the conduct of COIN operations. COIN requires Soldiers and Marines to be ready both to fight and to build—depending on the security situation and a variety of other factors. The full spectrum operations doctrine (described in FM 3–0) captures this reality.

**1–106.** All full spectrum operations executed overseas—including COIN operations—include offensive, defensive, and stability operations that commanders combine to achieve the desired end state. The exact mix varies depending on the situation and the mission. Commanders weight each operation based on their assessment of the campaign’s phase and the situation in their AO. They shift the weight among these operations as necessary to address situations in different parts of the AO while continuing to pursue their overall objectives.

over the past 58 years fought a series of conventional wars with decisive results followed by a series of unconventional wars with distinctly indecisive outcomes. In those 58 years, Israel has achieved its tactical and operational objectives of preserving its existence and failed in its strategic objective of regional and global acceptance. It has consistently given "priority to "kill-capture" enemy, not on engaging population" of the Arab states and populations surrounding it. Israeli military actions have centered on retribution and suppression. And like the U.S. military, the Israeli Defense Forces have often concentrated on firepower and technology as

the answer to defeating their enemies.

## STRATEGIC COIN

We face similar issues at the strategic level of the Global War on Terrorism. In the war against radical Islam, we are engaged in a global COIN operation. The population at the center of the struggle is the Muslim world. To win in this struggle, we have to expand the Muslim minority actively supporting our cause by winning greater support in the neutral or passive majority as we contain the radical Islamist. That is how we can fight the global radical Islamist insurgency. If we simply fixate on destroying the active insurgent minority, we

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### ***Precision Fires: The Efficiency Quotient of Precision Guided Munitions (PGMs)***

In discussing strategic COIN and strike operations, the subject of PGMs must be raised. Aerial delivery of munitions dates back to 1911 when an Italian pilot dropped a grenade on tribesmen near Tripoli. Since that date precision has been both goal and mantra of air power advocates and developers. Precision is of course relative to technological innovation and as air power has evolved technological innovation has increased the precision of PGMs. It is most important to understand that the driving force behind PGM development is efficiency of resources expended to target destruction. How one defines the target obviously influences the precision and efficiency of the weapon or weapons necessary to destroy it. The one bomb, one target formula of precision and efficiency can be applied to Hiroshima or an Iraqi tank in Kuwait in 1991.

Where discussions of precision and PGMs start to get muddled is when they are applied to the concept of "surgical" air strikes. The latter term crept into use in Vietnam as the US deployed tactical bombers in "surgical strikes" against strategic targets inside North Vietnam. "Surgical" implied that only selected legitimate targets would be destroyed. As Vietnam closed the development and deployment of laser-designated PGMs capable of one bomb, one target precision and efficiency seemingly merged the concept of "surgical" and precision into one. A PGM could be used to deliver "surgical" strikes, thus limiting damage and casualties to the immediate target.

That is true to the technological limitations of the weapon system; 500-pound JDAM with a circular error probable of 13 meters has a 50 per cent probability of hitting within 13 meters of the target; there is a 10 percent probability of incapacitation for anyone 95 meters from the point of impact. In other words, precision concerns chances of hitting the target; it has no impact on the blast radius of the bomb. "Surgical" strikes using PGMs are not necessarily surgical in their effects on the population around any target.

The risk associated with using these weapons during a conventional war, a retaliatory raid not tied to a greater campaign, or support of stability operation is almost certainly within acceptable limits. In a strategic COIN setting, surgical strikes using PGMs may cause more damage to our interests than they are worth.

are fighting the global radical Islamists, on terms favorable to their cause. To win their global insurgency, the radical Islamists cannot accept the existence of the neutral or passive majority. Radical movements cannot survive stasis as stagnant radical movements invite moderation. We often speak of a Long War in regretful terms when a long war of containment is truly in our best interests. If you seek a model for the "Long War" on terrorism, look at the Cold War and its effects on Communism.

With regards to firepower and its application in strategic COIN, Dr. Sepp's Paradoxes of COIN still apply. Our tendency to combine firepower and technology is matched by the ever-growing number of delivery systems and our strategic confusion in using them when we should not. In plain English that means precision strike operations against high value targets are counter productive when they fail to kill the targets or they kill persons other than the intended targets. Missing the targets offers the global radical Islamists two key victories in the battle for the neutral or passive Muslim majority we are fighting to win over. It validates the radicals as major threats against us. It demonstrates that our systems and intelligence are ineffective. Killing persons other than the intended target offers the global radical Islamists similar victories. Even if the specified targets are killed, killing others creates

sympathy for the targets and replacements for them. It demonstrates our indifference to such casualties. Indeed as Dr. Sepp points out, "sometimes doing nothing is the best reaction."<sup>1</sup>

## OPERATIONAL COIN

Operational COIN is theater-level, often regional in scope. Operation Enduring Freedom centers on Afghanistan but it's regional scope encompasses all bordering countries. Operation Iraqi Freedom certainly follows that pattern and exceeds it with effects reaching throughout the region. By its very nature, theater operations mesh the strategic with the tactical levels of war. Much of the discussion about strategic corporals keys on this idea. The strategic level COIN effort against global radical Islamists begins to focus more on the theater players in the operational fight for a theater like Iraq or Afghanistan. As that convergence takes place, it increases the likelihood that the operational commander will face the issue of striking or not striking a high value target like Zarqawi in Iraq or Al Qaeda and Taliban leaders inside Afghanistan. In the latter theater, such strikes have also taken place in Pakistan, particularly in the areas tribally aligned with the Taliban.

Continuing in Afghanistan, strategic emphasis on OIF since 2003 kept troop levels

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### Casualties: Aerial Bombs Versus Suicide Bombs 2006

	International Aerial Bombs	Local Suicide Bombs
Civilians	268–3000*	185 Killed /Wounded
Combatants	3000	57

\* Official figures–Local reports

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<sup>1</sup> Sepp

in OEF low even as the Taliban rebuilt and reoccupied much of its former haunts, especially its homelands in southern Afghanistan. Stepped up military levels in 2006 and increased operations in southern Afghanistan led to intensified fighting and a increasing use of aerial strikes. The Taliban has responded with an increased use of suicide bombings. The immediate loser in this escalation has been that neutral or passive majority. Consider the below chart adapted from the SENLIS report, "An Assessment of the Hearts and Minds Campaign in Southern Afghanistan, *Zroona aw Zehnoona*."<sup>1</sup>

Two salient points emerge from the chart. First is that suicide bombers killed fewer civilians than coalition air attacks. Second is—at least according to local reports and therefore in the locals' view—coalition air attacks killed a civilian for every combatant. Those two points—especially the latter—have been great blows to the credibility of the coalition forces seeking to win the support of that very same neutral or passive population. Large losses of life and even larger population displacement with concurrent food and health crises have resulted. Last year, the NATO-ISF Commander stated unequivocally that his command had to change its approach or that neutral majority would turn toward the Taliban. This echoed what I saw in Rwanda after Kibeho; the commanders, who focused purely on the enemy, ultimately were relieved and some went to prison.

<sup>1</sup> SENLIS, "An Assessment of the Hearts and Minds Campaign in Southern Afghanistan, *Zroona aw Zehnoona*," London: Autumn 2006, page 34.

## TACTICAL COIN: THE COP'S WORLD, RULES OF ENGAGEMENT, AND ESCALATION OF FORCE

It is at the tactical level that the relationship between COIN and the population emerges in clearest terms. **FM 3-24** makes that relationship clear :

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### Many Important Decisions Are Not Made by Generals

1-157. Successful COIN operations require competence and judgment by Soldiers and Marines at all levels. Indeed, young leaders—so-called “strategic corporals”—often make decisions at the tactical level that have strategic consequences. Senior leaders set the proper direction and climate with thorough training and clear guidance; then they trust their subordinates to do the right thing. Preparation for tactical-level leaders requires more than just mastering Service doctrine; they must also be trained and educated to adapt to their local situations, understand the legal and ethical implications of their actions, and exercise initiative and sound judgment in accordance with their senior commanders' intent.

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Since 2004, Coalition forces have improved procedures for escalation of force, clarified rules of engagement, and emphasized applying the principles of COIN in their operations. Escalating sectarian violence at first appeared as a background to the COIN effort; now that violence has taken center stage, making the struggle to win the support of a neutral or passive population as the population itself fragments into conflict. In this environment, the push to stand up a professional Iraqi military that understands its objective is to win the trust and support of the Iraq people offers the greatest hope for containing and then reducing sectarian strife.

## THE FALLACY OF COLLATERAL DAMAGE IN COIN

**FM 3-24** has in my estimation made great strides in clarifying COIN to the Army and our sister services and allies. I find one critical error in its tenets, one that I opened this paper with and will again repeat.

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### A Lesson From Rwanda

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Civilians on the battlefield in counter insurgency are not only part of the battlefield; they are the objective. There are no collateral casualties. All non-insurgent casualties are friendly.

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USAF Pamphlet 14-210 states, "According to DIA's BDA Quick Guide (PC- 8060- 1- 96, Feb 96), collateral damage is assessed and reported during the BDA process. Broadly defined, collateral damage is unintentional damage or incidental damage affecting facilities, equipment or personnel occurring as a result of military actions directed against targeted enemy forces or facilities. Such damage can occur to friendly, neutral, and even enemy forces." Not surprisingly, the text goes on to refer to Linebacker II in North Vietnam when B-52s conducted sustained strikes against previously restricted targets. Those attacks harkened back to the strategic bombing campaigns of WWII; Linebacker II was very much a conventional strategic air attack centered on breaking the will of the North Vietnamese. In contrast to Vietnam when collateral damage was used to describe friendly and civilian casualties, US commanders in Desert Storm addressed friendly casualties--US and Coalition--inflicted by friendly forces as fratricide. Such incidents are a "third rail" in US

military operations no commander wants to touch.

In contrast, collateral damage has remained the word of choice for civilian casualties. As it is used in FM 3-24, the term collateral damage largely reflects the idea of non-combatants or "civilians" wounded or killed in military operations. In a realm of conflict where the civilian population is the objective for insurgent word choice is more than a matter of semantics. Going back to Dr. Sepp's admonition that "priority to "kill-capture" enemy, not on engaging population" as a key indicator for unsuccessful COIN operations, describing civilian deaths or injuries as "collateral" damage only confirms that the COIN forces were focused on killing or capturing the enemy and the civilians were in the way.

Put another way, strategists have long warned that military forces are in support to diplomatic, political, and police forces in COIN operations. No police force in the Western world would try to kill a gang leader in a housing complex with a Hellfire missile. Why? Because the action against the gang leader is to protect the people in the housing complex from him. It is not to kill him at whatever cost to those same people. Any loss of civilian life is a friendly loss. The same rule applies to COIN.

*Thomas P. Odom is a graduate of Texas A&M University. He served as an army strategic scout for over fifteen years, with five tours in the Middle East and Africa, and as the U.S. Army's intelligence officer on the Middle East during the first Gulf War. Among his previous publications are two books on hostage rescues in the Congo. He is a coauthor of the U.S. Army's history of the Gulf War.*

*Editor's Note - Tom Odom is a flagrant repeat offender for contributions to SWJ Magazine, CALL, and the broader realm of military study. We hope he is never cured.*