Lessons Learned
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Lessons Learned

Some thoughts on COIN

by MajGen Robert B. Neller

Advisors are key to the development of HN forces. *(Photo by Sgt Pete Thibodeau.)*

I wrote this article in February 2009 upon the 2-year anniversary of my return from Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF). At the time, as Commanding General (CG), 3d Marine Division (3d MarDiv), I was able to see many of the issues addressed below as being relevant for operations in Afghanistan. Though no two operations are ever the same, with lessons from one completely applicable and transferable to the other, I believed then, and as events have borne out, believe now, that many of the issues in Operation ENDURING FREEDOM about rules of engagement (ROE), chain of command, "transition" battlespace ownership, advisors, etc., to name a few, might be resolved, or at least improved, if some of the observations noted below are considered. In the end, the counterinsurgency (COIN) fight may be the toughest mentally and emotionally of any form of conflict. It deserves our fullest attention and thought. Hopefully the following will assist you in your own professional development and mission accomplishment. Stay safe.

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It has been 2 years since I redeployed from Iraq after having served just shy of 1 year as the Deputy CG, Operations, Multinational Forces-West, during OIF 05–07. I have had ample time to reflect on what transpired during the year we were in Al Anbar—the successes, the failures, the sacrifice, the frustration and, most importantly, the results. Over the course of the deployment, everyone involved learned much, grew professionally, and changed personally. I was no exception.

The following are a few distilled lessons I learned about COIN during that year. Despite the fact that these lessons may not directly apply to all Marines, I believe they will cause the reader—corporal or colonel—to think about and consider their applicability for both today and future fights.

Know Your Mission

Our command had a very clear mission—to train Iraqi security forces and transition responsibility to them as they became capable in order to bring about the larger goal of transferring Al Anbar to Provincial Iraqi Governmental control. We necessarily planned to concurrently, and sometimes independently, fight those who resisted the efforts to establish a secure environment for the people until our primary task was achieved. I doubt that these two basic tasks will change in other insurgencies. If the host nation (HN) has competent security forces, the necessity of large conventional formations is mitigated. Once you sufficiently develop the support structure for HN forces to operate effectively, they must be put into the fight.

In the interim, our forces must be prepared to tackle the insurgents and buy time/space for this development. There should naturally follow a period of increased combined operations. Measurable positive progress in both the HN security force capacity and in the security situation should trigger incremental decreases in both size and responsibility of our force in operations as the HN force inversely increases. Ultimately, departure is the plan. That departure often takes longer than initially estimated. Efforts to artificially or prematurely speed up the process can also have the opposite effect. Building a competent and self-sustainable HN army and a police force simply takes time. Hopefully the political leaders who make policy and pay the bills understand this, but as they say, "if you want it bad, you get it bad."

People Are the Prize

Like politics, all COIN operations are local, and the people are the prize—not terrain, not a body count, not the number of patrols run or civil affairs projects completed. The security and well being of the people are the only metrics that determine your success. Everything you do, or in some cases not do, must be directed with this end state in mind. Must we always win "hearts and minds"? Not always, but if we can gain their trust and at least their neutral acceptance; i.e., that we and the HN security forces have a better plan for the people than the insurgents, we will get information and support. How do you measure this? The best measure of success to me is a decreasing level of violence, an increase in volunteers for service in the HN security forces, and the increased provision of information leading to the arrest of insurgents and the discovery of arms caches. Though reactions are culturally dependent, most people still vote with their feet.

Protect the People

Population centers are the "critical ground" and the most important places to secure since they are home to most of the locals and the center for government and business. The issue is separating the good citizens from the insurgents. In most cases entire villages or portions of cities can be bermed with dirt or barricaded using concrete barriers. Vehicle and pedestrian entry control points can control entrance to the restricted area. This will significantly restrict an insurgent's movement and force him under your technical and human "sensors." Once an area is bermed/barricaded then a count of legitimate citizens can be accomplished by conducting a census or, ideally, doing the census with biometric automated tools (BATs). Once all are "BATed," then the locals can be given identification cards tied to their biometric data. Anyone found inside the "secure" area is then readily identifiable.

Don't Commit Decisive Force Unless You're Willing to Stay

There's much talk about "clear, hold, and build" as a methodology for COIN operations. You cannot perform these tasks if you don't stay in an area and establish a presence and, more importantly, a relationship with the people. Without sufficient forces available, you cannot persevere and succeed in improving security in a given area of operations (AO). Lacking the adequate numbers of "boots on the ground," you must prioritize those places that you can properly secure and make reasonable efforts to mitigate the risk in the "uncovered" areas in order to deny their use as sanctuary to the enemy.

Another option is to try to be everywhere, moving from area to area in an attempt to limit the enemy's ability to gain a foothold. This approach can result in your being stuck in a never-ending cycle of "whack a mole" that never achieves your end state. The preferred course of action is always, in my opinion, to maintain a permanent presence in the population centers. This is true for big cities or small villages. Without a permanent and credible security force presence, which may initially be a coalition force prior to building and transitioning to HN responsibility, the people will neither trust nor provide information.

You cannot protect them if you don't stay. This lesson learned is probably the most important of all that I gained from my experience in Anbar. We made a commitment to not leave any populated areas where we were already established. This meant that certain areas remained without coalition forces (CF) or Iraqi presence until either our force and/or the Iraqi force increased in size. In the end, maintaining security in population centers is the only sure way to get the locals to cooperate with, and ultimately join, the security forces. This security also creates the opportunities for real progress in the critical economic and governance lines of operation.

Advisers Are Critical

There are some who think that merely collocating (partnering) a coalition unit with an HN unit will suffice

in achieving the development and maturation of the HN force. I strongly disagree. Advisers are the key to developing competent HN forces. A group of competent advisers who live, train, and operate with an HN force is the key to making it capable. The holistic development of a unit across all battlespace functions, but especially combat service support; e.g., administration, pay, supply, maintenance, is what will make these units truly professional. Adviser teams need to have representatives from across the functional areas of the Marine air-ground task force and should be experienced and mature leaders. This is one of the few times it can be advantageous to be an "old guy."

Advisor teams have also traditionally been undermanned with organic mobility and security—drivers and gunners. This can be remedied by reinforcing them with a squad of Marines to provide them with security and the means to move around the AO, thus freeing up their time to focus on advisor tasks. In 2006 we reinforced all military transition teams with anywhere from 10 to 30 personnel to support their mission, which I believe significantly increased their effectiveness and expedited the development of the Iraqi Army (IA). When units asked how they were supposed to do their own operations while providing more Marines to the IA, my response was, "You're not. They are supposed to be doing the operations."

As HN forces assume battlespace, the number of personnel assigned to adviser teams must increase, at least initially. We still absolutely need to partner; i.e., to operate alongside our HN forces. But the purpose of partnering is not merely to put "their face" on operations but to leverage their skills in working with the locals and, more importantly, to reinforce the fact that it is ultimately the HN's fight. As the HN forces mature in their battlespace, the need for both partnering and advising will decrease. The optimal solution at the outset is to begin with the application of smart partnering and good advisors.

One Commander Has to 'Own' the Ground and Have a Plan to Transition It

In Anbar the answer to the question, "Who owns the ground?" was pretty simple. The CF did. However, as the size and capability of the IA, border forces, and police grew, this issue became more and more complex and contentious. In fact, our goal was to transition responsibility for separate and independent battlespace to units as they became capable. In some cases, this took place even before they came under Iraqi Ministry of Defense or Ministry of Interior control. Eventually our plan came to fruition. The two IA divisions in Anbar were transferred to the command of the Iraqi Ground Forces Command (subordinate to their own Ministry of Defense) and became our "adjacent units." Because the provincial/city police also worked in these AO and were under Ministry of Interior control, this transition was more difficult but achievable through close cooperation with the police and use of embedded advisors to bridge the gaps between all three parties (IA, Iraqi police, and CF).

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In some of the other AOs in Iraq, this form of coordination and cooperation did not always occur. In many cases there were no command relationships established between coexisting coalition and the HN units and/or too few advisors to adequately enable critical coordination and cooperation between them. The absence of a coherent plan for transitioning responsibility from CF to the HN security forces results in duplication of effort, confusion, physical and/or psychological "seams" and, potentially, fratricide. The bottom line is that you cannot have two organizations responsible for the same geographical area. Someone is in the lead and the rest are under operational control, tactical control or, in the case of the police, control by direct influence (also known as HandCon) of that lead entity. Working as adjacent units is fine as long as there is a mechanism—in most cases advisors—to communicate and coordinate the activities of both groups.

The end state for all CF in a COIN environment is the transitioning of battlespace to the HN security forces. If there is no plan to transition responsibility, which requires the training and forming of a competent HN force, you are saying the equivalent of "we will never leave."

***Improving and Sustaining Security:* Build the 'Trinity' of Police, Army, and Local Government**

In every town where we were able to improve the security environment, we were also able to recruit men for the HN security forces. As security improved we were able to find local leaders to provide local government. When we had security forces and local government the insurgents soon departed, life improved, shops opened, roads were repaired, and children went back to school. In maintaining the security environment, the police are more effective than the army. Normally recruited from the local men, they know the town, the people, and the streets—who belongs and who does not. The local citizenry trusts them because many are related and provide them with intelligence. Though there can be issues of too much familiarity and corruption, I cannot imagine conducting a successful COIN without the development of a local police force.

See the Enemy

It has been stated many times that "the people are not the enemy, but the enemy hides among the people." So how do you distinguish friend from

ROE isn't left to the individual Marine's interpretation. *(Photo by Sgt Freddy G. Cantu.)*

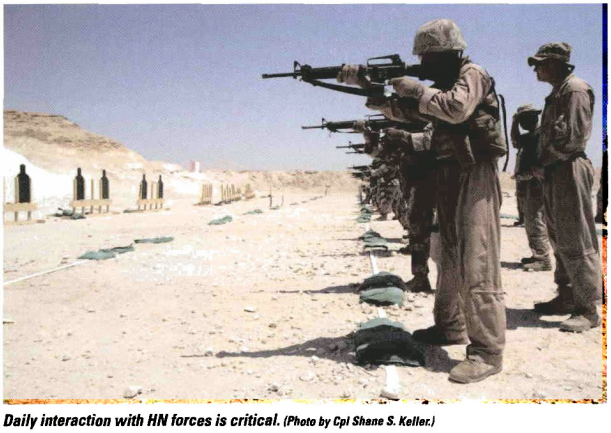
foe? Several ways are available. First, our enemies do things to identify themselves that we can exploit. It could be the color or style of their clothes or the type and color of cars they drive. Not unlike gang members, they act, dress, and drive in certain discernable styles and patterns. They may use native language stickers on the back window of the cars that we cannot read. Or they may remove a certain hubcap or mark their hubcaps with symbols. Once you find these details you must inform and educate the force. HN forces are critical in both identifying these tippers and sensitizing us, if we ask and make an effort to learn from them.

Know Your ROE and Continually Reinforce Their Purpose

When quick decisions must be made about employing force, you cannot afford time to ponder basic questions about the ROE. For example, who can go into the mosque? Can I shoot back at enemy in the schoolhouse? Can I approve the targeting of this building in a built-up area? Who has the authority to approve the target or deliver air ordnance? Can/Should we detain women? These are all examples of types of questions that arise in COIN. Before those situations arise, you must have the ability to quickly answer these questions, or better yet, you must know the rules up front and have rehearsed all of the scenarios and tested your responses. In a crisis be prepared to rapidly huddle in the combat operations center with the senior watch officer, the staff judge advocate, and the public affairs officer to answer ROE questions. I would strongly recommend having a quick reference on the ROE available to all addressing the rules for all contingences that can be reasonably foreseen, from building entry to collateral damage estimates.

All Marines who have daily interaction on the ground need to know and be trained daily in application of the ROE. They must at a minimum know the practical definitions and understand how to determine and apply the following: hostile act, hostile intent, positive identification of a target, collateral damage estimation, and the minimum force to counter. More importantly, Marines must understand why the ROE exist. Marines need to be "educated" in the application of these rules and the consequences of their application, as well as the potentially disastrous consequences of improper application. On occasion you will hear about units or individuals with their own interpretation of the ROE. If you are made aware of these contrary views, they must be dealt with swiftly and, if necessary, harshly. To train only in the rote memorization of the tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) of ROE and not educate as to the reasoning and applicability of those rules may cause the force to inappropriately act.

It is the easy way out to always go kinetic. Though the inherent right of self-defense will always remain paramount, in a COIN environment the default reaction must always be to "not shoot."



Daily interaction with HN forces is critical. *(Photo by Cpl Shane S. Keller.)*

COIN is a thinking man's game. *(Photo by Cpl Samantha L. Jones.)*

HN forces as true partners with the goal of transitioning the fight to them when they are ready constitutes a basic template that I believe has, with account for variations dependent on the culture and situation, universal application as a basic concept of operation for COIN. Little has been mentioned here about the other lines of operation needed for long-term success—good governance, the rule of law, and economic opportunity—all critical to the ultimate end state. However, without the blanket of security ultimately provided by the HN's security forces, police, and army, none of these lines of operations will take root, and we risk not leaving on our own terms.

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Never Underestimate Our Enemy; Anticipate His Adaptation to Your Countermeasures

Our enemy is neither stupid nor afraid to die, making him very dangerous. In a war with a thinking enemy, every action elicits a counteraction. When you change your TTP or add additional capabilities, you must anticipate the enemy's reaction and plan your next move. Your foremost aim is to make the enemy react to you and strive to avoid frequently reacting to him. We are our own worst enemies in this game. We are creatures of habit who like and encourage routine. Our routines and rhythms; e.g., chow hall hours, drive us into patterns that we often overlook, ignore, or dismiss at our own peril. Take the time to analyze your patterns against enemy actions. Look at when things happen, how they happen, and to whom they happen in order to determine if you are becoming too predictable. Be your own red cell.

Conclusion

Operating effectively in COIN is a thinking man's game. Playing the kinetic card is not always the answer and, in many cases, may be absolutely the wrong course to pursue. Having sufficient force to secure population centers, emplacing robust advisor presence with all HN forces, and working with