Observations of a Strategic Corporal

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There is another type of warfare—new in its intensity, ancient in its origin—war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins; war by ambush instead of combat, by infiltration instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him. It preys on unrest.

— John Fitzgerald Kennedy, 1962

TODAY'S OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT (OE) calls for intelligence to be both gathered and disseminated at the lowest level. Platoons on the ground are making key decisions, and it is the "strategic corporals" who are the difference-makers in this age of irregular warfare. No longer are junior enlisted service members tasked only to perform battle drills and provide security in a line platoon. Everyone in the platoon is an intelligence collector and can bring something to the counterinsurgency table.

In today's warfare, the military intelligence community needs to take a step backward to move forward. We now face a new enemy, one that functioned in ancient times and that has rendered our sophisticated high-tech tools useless. Today's enemy is not the progressive and powerful Soviet Union, but the unsophisticated, ununiformed insurgent. To paraphrase David Ignatius, our enemies who live like it's the past and behave like it's the past have realized that they are fighting guys from the future, and guys from the future find it very hard to see you if you throw away your cell phone, shut down your email, and pass all your instructions face-to-face, hand-to-hand. If your adversary turns his back on technology and just disappears into the crowd with no flags and no uniforms, and your friends dress just like your enemies and your enemies dress like your friends, then the boots on the ground have a very hard time finding an opponent to fight.[1]

The Intelligible Human Dynamic

In this day and age, all the sophisticated technology in the world will not defeat our new enemy by itself. During standard Cold War operations, intelligence capabilities were quite effective in determining the enemy's intentions, situation, and likely courses of action. The rigid nature of those operations allowed intelligence personnel to apply templates to probable

Corporal Scott R. Mitchell recently completed his second deployment to Afghanistan as the nonlethal targeting subject matter expert while working with an intelligence support team. He received extensive predeployment instruction including counterinsurgency theory, socio-political information collection, and evaluation training.

PHOTO: U.S. Army CPL Shane Rager, Khost Provincial Reconstruction Team, provides security during a quality assurance check of the new road that extends from the Tani district center to the village of Narizah, 5 April 2010. (U.S. Air Force, SrA Julianne M. Showalter)

actions and maximize the collection capabilities of technological systems. However, in today's operational environment, such technical superiority is marginalized. We must become more aware of the enemy's intangible human dynamic. To do so requires a heavier focus on human intelligence, cultural preparation, and counterinsurgency techniques. As Montgomery McFate expressed it, "Traditional methods of warfighting have proven inadequate in Iraq and Afghanistan. U.S. technology, training, and doctrine designed to counter the Soviet threat are not designed for low-intensity counterinsurgency operations where civilians mingle freely with combatants in complex urban terrain."[2]

One of many difficulties we have today is convincing a chain of command that adheres to a tradition of fighting and winning wars using conventional methods that they must abandon the old ways and implement new innovative ways for a nonfighting war. In today's counterinsurgency operational environment, the main effort is the population, not the enemy. Unconventional warfare offers a solution to insurgent-fed war that kinetic or conventional warfare does not. Kinetic or conventional warfare uses conventional military intelligence, weapons, and battlefield tactics between two or more states in open confrontation. The adversaries are well defined and fight using weapons that primarily target the opposing army. However, conventional warfare simply does not work when fighting an insurgency.

In a counterinsurgency war environment, a higher number of hard-to-predict events occur, as they do on a daily basis in Afghanistan. Assassinations, improvised explosive devices, and ambushes are less likely to be picked up through imagery intelligence and signals intelligence.[3] We need to look to other sources of intelligence for a better operational picture of the battle space. Human intelligence is one of those sources that we should be relying on, and it should come from a wide array of collectors, not just those with 35-series MOSs. Soldiers who patrol

the battle space, private through captain, can and should bring data to the analyst. While fighting in a counterinsurgency the "strategic corporal" plays a particularly important role. Because our main effort is the population, understanding the population's needs, wants, motives, and grievances will help separate it from the insurgence. Who better to gather that data than the boots on the ground?

Fine Points

During my time in Afghanistan, I identified five things the Army needs to do to perform well in a counterinsurgency:

● Educate the operators on counterinsurgency tactics and why the use of courageous restraint is necessary and will lead to victory.

● Have a good understanding of the values, norms, and beliefs of those who reside in our operational environment and a systematic way of collecting and disseminating data about them.

● Manage information and expectations.

● Empower the fighting force at the lowest levels.

● Support host nation elements attached to our units.

As I noted above, we must convince the chain of command to implement new, innovative ways of "nonfighting" the war. When I attempted to do this, I discovered that many of the soldiers in southern Afghanistan had not read FM 3-24, or knew Fall, Galula, or Kilcullen's works. The basic principles of counterinsurgency were foreign to them. This left them ill-equipped and uninformed about the fundamental concepts of counterinsurgency. They found the use of measured force a very hard pill to swallow. However, in today's operational environment, our main effort is to protect the people. Because collateral damage hurts that cause, in some cases, seeking cover is better than shooting. We need soldiers to change their mind-set–and stop reacting to contact and start responding to the many different

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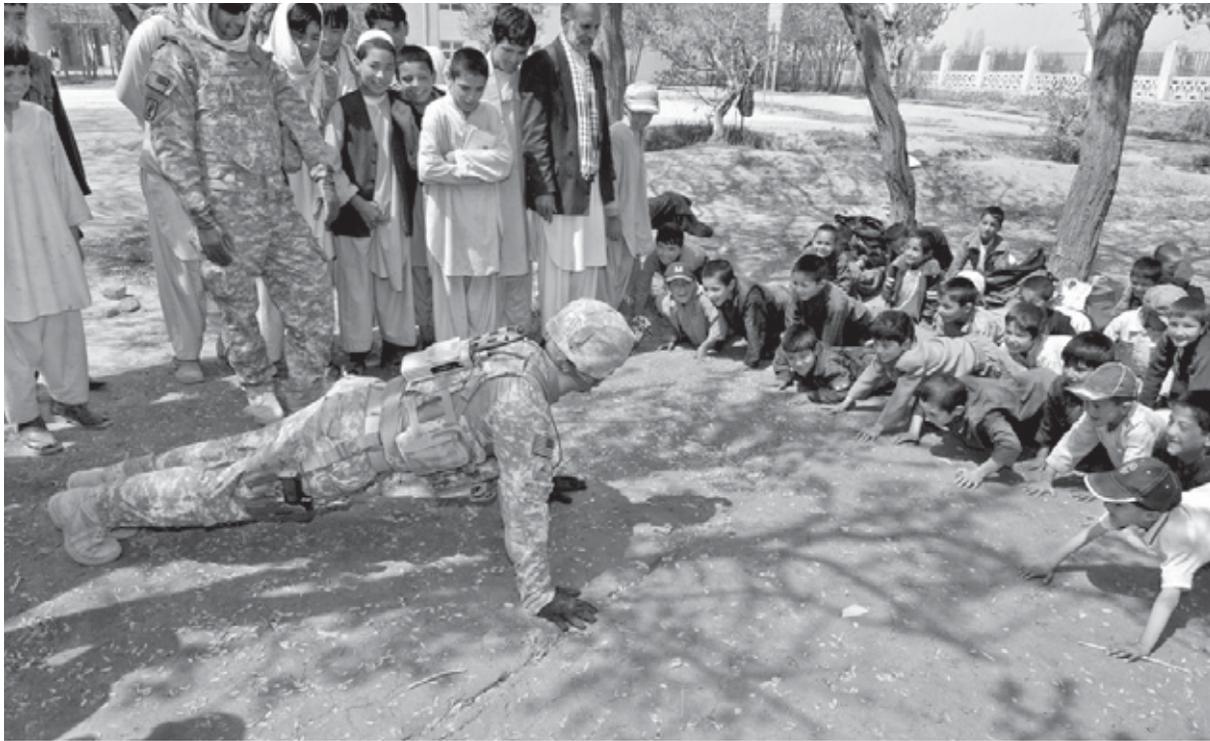
U.S. Army CPL Mark Woodyard, a Texas Agribusiness Development Team security forces member, teaches Afghan kids how to do push-ups at Sanayee High School in Ghazni Province, Afghanistan, 8 April 2010.

situations unconventional warfare presents. According to pundit Robert Steele, "In this environment, as in the law enforcement environment, shooting is the last thing you want a soldier to do, and thinking is the only thing you will want every soldier to be doing 24/7."[4] Although killing will be necessary, it must be ruthlessly accurate and measured against the reaction it is likely to produce. What are its second- and third-order effects? For example, if killing five insurgents creates ten more, is killing the five prudent? Counterinsurgency is a political process; it is a battle to win the favor of the people, not a race to kill the enemy. Mao Tse-tung notably said, "Politics is war without bloodshed, while war is politics with bloodshed."[5]

Yet, I found that the boots on the ground regarded courageous restraint as cowardice and persistent presence patrols and defensive operations as more of a hindrance than a "real mission." As soldiers who adhered to the tradition of fighting and winning wars using conventional methods, they were more interested in killing the enemy than in key

leader engagements. I found this mind-set from commander to private. It must change in order for us to be successful. In a counterinsurgency, killing is not our main effort. In the words of Lieutenant General Michael T. Flynn, "Anti-insurgent efforts are, in fact, a secondary task when compared to gaining and exploiting knowledge about the localized contexts of operations and the distinctions between the Taliban and the rest of the Afghan population."[6] Educating our platoon leaders on counterinsurgency should be standard procedure, as should be issuing and assigning FM 3-24 reading before deployment to Afghanistan.

We need a better understanding of the values, norms, and beliefs of those who reside within our area of operations. We should never assume what is happening there; we must always find out what is occurring. The "green layer" of the battle space is the most important layer in a counterinsurgency. According to a Center for Lessons Learned handbook, "The population in the area of conflict as a distinct and critical aspect of the situation. In both operational

theaters today (Iraq and Afghanistan) it is important to understand local knowledge and to understand the population, referred to as the green layer."[7] We must answer the questions of who, what, when, where, and how as they pertain to culture, social behavior, norms and sanctions, conflict resolution, legitimacy of authority figures, the political and economic systems (both formal and informal), demographics, cultural geography, essential services, religious factors, popular attitudes, and external factors.

Culture is an essential aspect of the green layer. What may look abnormal in America may be perfectly acceptable in the area of operation. Myths and storytelling are a big aspect of tribal society. Understanding indigenous historical narratives improves our situational awareness. Understanding how the people resolve conflicts is a big part of understanding the environment, especially in places like Afghanistan, where the insurgents have set up shadow court systems to administer justice. Knowing who the legitimate authority figures are helps us identify what is right and wrong. The people we may think are in charge, such as village elders, maliks, or mullahs, are often puppets, with insurgents pulling their strings. Look for and find the true leaders. One of the ways to do this is by looking to see who the people are drawn to. Ask questions that bring the identities of the true power brokers to light. Who do the people go to for help? Whom do they seek approval from?

Understanding the economic system is also vital. How one makes his living often determines what side of the insurgency he will side with. Do not overlook institutions, essential services, and demographics. Knowing area literacy and employment rates, religious sect membership, and the population's education, race, age, gender, and socio-economic status will also help in understanding the OE.

However, we must understand not only the condition but also the capabilities in the area. Schools and infrastructure are the building blocks of stability. But if there are no teachers to fill the schools, building them is fruitless. External factors affecting the environment are particularly significant. How do neighboring countries and foreign partners influence the environment? How does the local population interact with the foreign authority, and what is their reaction to the presence of foreign authority?[8]

Knowing the socio-cultural information of the area of operation will aid us in the military decision making process and enable us to answer the important question of "why" things are happening. Looking past our own experience and studying a new world is foreign to Americans. Most Americans are ethnocentric in that we generally rebuff, rebuke, and berate that which is unknown. We need to understand and accept people's differences for what they are and move forward. As Sir John Bagot Glubb wrote in *War in the Desert*, "The greater part of mankind is so narrowly and so complacently satisfied with their own standpoint that it never occurs to them to imagine themselves in other men's positions, or to endeavor to analyze their motives. What a different world it would be if you all did so!"[9]

Completing a census operation is important. This is something that the troop I was assigned to did well in Afghanistan. We conducted a village census and with the help of a human terrain team, we were able to collect comprehensive demographic data on the population. We obtained villagers' perspectives on security, village needs, local leaders, and sources of prosperity. After finishing our field-work, we collected, organized, and uploaded the census data into a database in an effort to distribute the data to a global military audience. Being able

U.S. Army 1LT Jared Tomberlin, second from left, 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment, U.S. Army Europe, speaks with village elders during a key leader engagement in a town near Forward Operating Base Lane, Zabul, Afghanistan, 5 March 2009. (U.S. Army, SSgt Adam Mancini)

(U.S. Army)

U.S. Marine Corps LCpl Jonathan Ginter with 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, Regimental Combat Team 8, speaks with an Afghan man using an interpreter during a census patrol in Sangin, Afghanistan, 5 June 2011.

to access census information was very useful to our unit. I found that throughout our theater of operations we do an excellent job capturing and distributing data pertaining to lethal targets, but little nonlethal census information is available.

To better prepare the unit to conduct a systematic census, I broke the village down into zones A through I and then assigned a gridded reference graphic number to each house in the zones. This gave the unit a starting point from which to obtain a standard grid reference. During the census fieldwork, we asked basic household questions, took photos of military-aged males as well, then transferred the data to a baseball-card format and uploaded it by gridded reference graphic into the database.

This allowed access to the information from any military computer, and was useful during routine patrols for real-time information about subjects during tactical questioning and street-level engagements. Much like a police officer in the United States, I could run a name or address and quickly relay information back to the unit on the ground, reporting how many people lived in a given house, describing them, and providing identifying questions such as "What is your father's name"?

We have to manage information and expectations. Every action has a reaction in the realm of information. Word spreads very quickly in the new operational environment and insurgents use this to their advantage. Those we are protecting see and hear everything we do and say. Our actions always produce a positive or negative information reaction. We must constantly be aware of what we say and do and understand that our behaviors affect our environment in a positive or negative way; it all depends on us.

Even so, there are fundamental differences in the way we and the insurgent use information operations. The insurgent tends to formulate an information operations message and then plan an operation to support it. According to a report from the Army War College, "Insurgents use kinetic actions to achieve informational and political effects within the population"[10] We formulate a mission and then create an information operations message that supports that mission.[11]

This fundamental difference is one of the reasons the insurgents are superior at accomplishing their political objective. The current state of our information operations is, as Steele wrote, "a mutant mix of public relations and psychological operations on steroids, with zero intelligence."[12] To counter the insurgent information operations message we must recognize this and move progressively and decisively, remembering that our combat actions generally have a negative impact on our political objective, and insurgent actions are a means to an end.

In places such as Afghanistan, it can be very frustrating for the populace to recognize that the United States cannot help them with all their problems. They regard the U.S. soldier as if he were from outer space. For example, the equipment that allows us to survive explosions and see in the dark is completely alien to a people living as though it were the year 3 A.D. Such persons wonder why we cannot provide them with electrical power

with the snap of our fingers. We must use effective information operations campaigns to ensure that the population is aware of what we can—and cannot—do for them. Furthermore, we should allow the population to take ownership of any improvements to the environment, so they will protect and maintain the gains we fought so hard to get. It is better for them to purchase a generator than it is for us to give them one; by purchasing it they will take ownership of it. There was evidence of this in Nuristan in 2006 with the development of a USAID micro hydro-electricity project, where the village purchased micro hydro-electric generators, took ownership of them, and defended them against theft or destruction by insurgents.[13]

Fourth, empower the fighting force at the lowest levels. Counterinsurgency is a decentralized war and as such, we have to empower the troops on the ground to make decisions that suit their needs. As stated above, "strategic corporals" are the difference-makers. In addition, we should have a good, well-equiped company intelligence support team presence on the ground working with the fighting force gathering data and quickly converting that data into actionable intelligence and putting it into ground commanders' hands. Many soldiers are unaware of the role of these teams, and in many instances, the teams are left in the dark on upcoming missions and uninformed on results from those missions. In various battalion- and company-sized units, tasks such as tactical site exploitation are incomplete, and debriefs are given by platoon leaders or senior enlisted only. We need better understanding of how the company intelligence support team can help commanders and platoon leaders in mission planning and intelligence preparation.

Last, there must be support for the host nation. The war has to be won by those we are trying to help. The fundamental advantage the insurgent has is time; he will remain in the environment when we leave. We need to convince the population that their government will protect them when we leave. One of the best ways to do this is through joint operations, standing should-to-shoulder with our host-nation partner. Training, mission planning, and maneuvers should all be joint operations with the ultimate goal of having the host nation take the lead.

> ***The most effective weapon in today's operational environment is the shot not fired.***

Conclusion

As counterinsurgency advisor Kilcullen has stated, in today's operational environment, the enemy is fluid but the population is fixed.

When you fight a conventional enemy, you attack something that the enemy must defend, and then you use that ground as a pivot point in which to maneuver. In counterinsurgency, the enemy has nothing to defend. When you start making ground and pushing back, the enemy in an insurgency can just walk away or hide amongst the population.[14]

Ground troops—not just specialized human collection and terrain teams—must collect HUMINT throughout the region. The main focus must be on the population, not the enemy; the enemy can run away, the population cannot. As Killcullen wrote, "Fighting an insurgency using conventional warfare is like looking for a needle in a haystack, but you're actually destroying the haystack to find the needle."[15]

Conventional warfare damages the population, which alienates them, and creates a recruitment base for the insurgents, which creates a cycle of destruction. In a counterinsurgency, you need to convince the "haystack" to give you the "needle."

An insurgency requires the enemy to rouse the population. It also must act in a way that leads to support and sympathy. In a counterinsurgency, the troops need to interrupt this cycle; by being in the village patrolling, much like a neighborhood police officer, they can take the reaction of the population away from the insurgency. If they succeed, it will be difficult for the insurgent to achieve anything: "The role of the international force in counterinsurgency is to hold the ring and create space that allows the political process to take place."[16]

We need to create enough calmness and enough population security to allow political leadership

to go forward. If we do not fight in today's current theaters of operation using nonconventional means, we will lose. The thought process of reacting to contact must change. Before we react, we must understand our environment and respond. It will take an enormous amount of courageous restraint and understanding to win, for every shot fired, every bomb dropped is a step back in the war to win the favor of the population, and the population is the key to success. The most effective weapon in today's operational environment is the shot not fired. According to McFate, "Often, the application of overwhelming force has the negative, unintended effect of strengthening the insurgency by creating martyrs, increasing recruitment, and demonstrating the 'brutality' of state forces."[17]

The military community has to start looking at doing things that are not traditional. "Counterinsurgency strategies should be designed to simultaneously protect the population from insurgent violence; strengthen the legitimacy and capacity of government institutions to govern responsibly and marginalize insurgents politically, socially, and economically."[18] If you can win the support of the people then they will permit an environment that allows for a stable government structure, and that stable government structure will have the ability to maintain the rule of law. *MR*

NOTES

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18. Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, Department of State, "U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide" (Washington, DC: Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, 13 January 2009).