

FIGHTING INSURGENTS--NO SHORTCUTS TO SUCCESS

Lieutenant Colonel James S. Corum
U.S. Army War College

For the last 3 decades, the Army, the Defense Department, and the CIA have emphasized the high tech aspects of intelligence, sophisticated electronic collection equipment, and multibillion dollar space surveillance programs. Even at the tactical level, Army intelligence personnel are trained primarily to employ a variety of high tech collection means including UAVs, sensors and ground radars. This approach to intelligence collection was appropriate when the intelligence priorities were geared to counting Soviet missile systems or defending the Fulda Gap against a massive Soviet tank attack.

In the meantime, old-fashioned human intelligence (HUMINT) was downplayed and largely ignored in our military culture. When faced with masses of enemy tanks and guns on the battlefield, the object is to find the enemy equipment and develop targeting information for Army and Air Force targeteers. In the big conventional war, developing intelligence about the personality of the enemy commander or the enemy troop morale from prisoner interrogation might be interesting, but certainly not especially useful to the senior combat commander in the midst of battle.

However, our low priority function of human intelligence is, according to every counterinsurgency theorist, the key to fighting and winning a counterinsurgency campaign. Human intelligence is very much an art, not a science. Moreover, it is a very inexact art that requires a methodical approach to building up data bases, establishing relationships, and understanding enemy psychology. The intelligence picture of the insurgents is built largely on information provided by unreliable sources and partial data combined with the analyst's intuition.

In a military with an overwhelmingly conventional war mindset with senior officers used to getting exact data verified by high tech scientific means, the very inexact intelligence provided by HUMINT almost is guaranteed to cause a high level of frustration for commanders and intelligence personnel alike. So, the temptation in counterinsurgency to modify the methods to gain useful information from those thought to possess it is understandable. Thus, it would be useful to remind ourselves of some lessons of history.

Insurgencies like the one we are facing in Iraq are nothing very new. Two leading counterinsurgency theorists have addressed the issue of intelligence and interrogation techniques in counterinsurgency in considerable detail. Both provide some important insights into the intelligence issues that we are facing today in Iraq. Two major theories of counterinsurgency apply to Iraq, those of French Colonel Roger Trinquier and those of British General Frank Kitson. Trinquier had experience in counterinsurgency in Indochina, Algeria, and the Congo, and in 1962 wrote *Modern Warfare*, which was quickly translated into English and became popular at the time of Vietnam. Like most counterinsurgency theorists, Trinquier argued that good intelligence was the key to

breaking the terrorist/insurgent organization. Trinquier's solution to the terrorist acts staged against the French forces and pro-French elements of the population was to advocate torture for suspected terrorist supporters as the only effective means to quickly gain vital information that could save the lives of French forces and their civilian supporters.

Yet Trinquier had, in many respects, a very conventional military mindset as he thought in terms of winning a quick and decisive military victory against insurgents. To win the quick victory, torture and abuse became a feature of French counterinsurgency operations in Indochina and Algeria. While torture of captured insurgents could sometimes yield valuable information that led to short-term military successes, in the long run it worked against the French presence and legitimacy. The Trinquier approach, while useful in the short term, contributed to the long-term strategic failure.

A contrasting approach to counterinsurgency is offered by Frank Kitson, a British officer who served in World War II, and had experience in conducting counterinsurgency operations in Malaya, Africa, and Cyprus. In his book, *Low Intensity Operations* (1971), Kitson described the approach to counterinsurgency developed by the British Army. First, Kitson did not believe that insurgencies could be defeated through rapid, decisive operations. Defeating insurgents required a long-term commitment and a methodical approach to clear insurgents district by district, to build up the institutions of civil government, and to systematically isolate insurgents from the general population.

As with Trinquier, Kitson believed that good intelligence was the key to winning the battle. Unlike Trinquier, Kitson did not advocate torturing or abusing prisoners. Indeed, Kitson argued strongly that counterinsurgency operations had to be conducted within the rule of law. This, of course, did not mean that strong coercive methods could not be applied in an area of high terrorist activity. Kitson thought it appropriate to detain and interrogate suspected terrorist supporters regularly, partly to send a message that the government forces were keeping a close eye. The information objective of detaining and interrogating was also to build up a district intelligence profile of relationships and rivalries—information that the district intelligence officer could exploit.

International law and the traditional rules of war allow for some very firm tactics employed to coerce and control populations. For example, to cut off support for rebels in pro-insurgent districts, Kitson advocated that government forces commandeer and carefully control all food stocks. Food was rationed by the police and army only to registered village residents, and whole villages would be cordoned off to prevent extra food from being brought in. If the villagers wanted to give food to the rebels, they could do so only if they starved themselves. The British also figured that, if the insurgents came in the night and took the peoples' carefully rationed food, people would eventually inform on the insurgents rather than face hunger. Such tactics were not only effective, but also legal.

The good thing about Kitson's approach to waging a counterinsurgency campaign strictly within the rule of law is that it generally works. The downside is that such an approach to counterinsurgency and intelligence takes a long time, and success is

measured not in any dramatic terms but in small, local, and incremental victories. It should be no surprise that some of our intelligence personnel and leaders might instinctively opt for the Trinquier approach with its promise of quick and decisive results, when our military doctrine is filled with adjectives such as “rapid” and “decisive” to describe the American mode of warfare. Yet the traditionally successful counterinsurgency doctrines are peppered with adjectives such as “methodical,” “systematic,” and “long-term.”

The core of the problem is that few in the U.S. armed forces have a real understanding of insurgencies, what motivates insurgency or how to successfully combat insurgencies. One of the primary effects of the Vietnam War upon the U.S. military was a corporate attempt to cut the study of counterinsurgency and small wars from the mainstream U.S. military education and training. From the late 1970s to the 1990s, the U.S. Army dealt with the failure of Vietnam by not dealing with it. For the Army and the Air Force, the post-Vietnam doctrinal reforms consisted of a single-minded emphasis on fighting the big conventional war.

The study of small wars, wars against nonstate entities, received only the most perfunctory mention in the army schools or Professional Military Education (PME). When I entered the army in the late 1970s and went to the Intelligence officers’ course at Ft. Huachuca, in 6 months I received not 1 hour of instruction on the role of intelligence in counterinsurgency. The whole focus of the program was to learn to fight the Soviets in Central Europe. For 2 decades, efforts to take small wars seriously were only intermittent. At the Command and Staff Course at Ft. Leavenworth in the 1990s, small wars were taught as an elective, and the course was cancelled 1 year for lack of interest. In the 1980s the Army War College offered a course on small wars, but this was later cut for additional instruction in conventional war campaigns.

Throughout the Air Force education system, the story was much the same. Only in the Special Operations community were small wars studied seriously. Indeed, the Army school at Ft. Bragg and the Air Force Special Operations School offered some outstanding courses and maintained a corps of small wars experts. Yet the Special Operations community was and is outside the mainstream of U.S. military doctrine. Even as the United States became heavily involved in peacekeeping and peace enforcement in the 1990s, little attention was paid to preparing officers and NCOs for such operations. As a result, in the post-9/11 world most of the Army was mentally unprepared to fight terrorists and insurgents in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Clausewitz argued that the first step of the strategist is to know the kind of war he is facing. In this spirit, we need to understand that war waged against a nonstate entity (rebels, insurgents, terrorists, factions, etc.) fundamentally is different from a war waged against a conventional state. We may use the same soldiers and much of the same technology as in conventional war—but the fundamental strategic issues and objectives are different.

Insurgents do not have strategic centers that can be targeted with kinetic weapons. Insurgents and terrorists rarely offer the opportunity for a large conventional battle where we can employ our overwhelming firepower and technology advantages. They

blend with the civilian population and attack by ambush or suicide bombs. Their very existence relies on the active support of, or at least passive attitude of, the civilian population. The attitude of the civilian population, not necessarily a major factor in fighting a conventional army, becomes a central factor in the success or failure of a counterinsurgency campaign. Most theories of counterinsurgency would recognize that the alleged prisoner abuse in Iraq represents a major challenge for coalition forces because it hardens the terrorists' and insurgents' resolve not to surrender and encourages a larger segment of the Iraqi population to support the insurgency.

If true, the allegations of widespread abuse of prisoners in Iraq would suggest an urgent need to reorient our military intelligence and CIA training and organizations with a high priority on developing HUMINT personnel who can operate in a counterinsurgency environment. The problem is that developing a large cadre of personnel who truly understand intelligence operations in counterinsurgency will take time. In the meantime, we can begin by educating our intelligence personnel in the basic theories and techniques of counterinsurgency.

However, changing the intelligence community is only the first step. To fight terrorists and insurgents successfully around the world, Army leaders at all levels need to understand the basics of counterinsurgency theory and operations. This means that the Army needs to include a significant block of instruction on counterinsurgency theory, terrorist organizations, small wars doctrine, and historical case studies in all the branch schools, in the Command and Staff College, and at the War College. Moreover, such courses need to be taught not as a subset of conventional war, but separately and by instructors who have practical experience in fighting unconventional enemies.

Two reasons exist to require all the army leaders to understand counterterrorism and counterinsurgency doctrine. First is that in fighting an insurgency, junior leaders need to understand the strategy and operate with the strategic goal in mind. In small wars, even relatively low level actions (like abusing prisoners) can have strategic effects. This is not the case in conventional warfare where a company commander needs to understand his and his higher echelon's mission but does not need to know the grand strategy to lead his troops effectively. The second reason is that, like it or not, the U.S. Army will be involved in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations for decades to come. With the Army directly involved in fighting two major insurgencies (Iraq and Afghanistan) and supporting counterinsurgency operations in the Philippines and Colombia, no end is in sight, and the mission is too large to slough off on the Special Operations forces.

To cut back on conventional war, training and education will go against Army culture. However, the Army's dramatic conventional victories in the First and Second Gulf Wars are proof that we are the supreme military force in the world in conducting conventional war. On the other hand, recent operations show that we do not have an equal standing in the art of fighting insurgents and terrorists. While keeping the Army's primary focus on fighting large wars, we certainly can afford to cut back on some of the conventional war courses and wargames and courses in administrative procedures to make room for courses in counterinsurgency, complete with wargames centered on

small wars operations.

An Army leadership educated in the complex art of counterinsurgency will understand that there are no quick fixes and no shortcuts to defeating insurgents and will plan and operate accordingly. Historically, once an insurgency gets started, there is no such thing as a quick ending. Insurgencies can be defeated—but victory invariably takes a long time and is reached through a methodical approach that emphasizes interagency coordination. An Army and Intelligence community that thoroughly understands the basics of counterinsurgency operations is much more likely to achieve strategic success by employing a variety of classic and lawful counterinsurgency techniques that have worked in the past.