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Still Shortchanged

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Still Shortchanged: Some Observations About the New Army/Marine Corps COIN Doctrine

Charles J. Dunlap, Jr.

When the [then new Army/Marine Corps' counterinsurgency \(COIN\) doctrine](#) was fielded in 2006, it quickly earned the label of “The Book” on Iraq and, later, Afghanistan. At the time this writer ([among others](#)) offered [critiques](#) of it which were not just ignored, but openly ridiculed.

Given the gloomy outcomes of the wars in both places, one would have thought that a doctrinal re-assessment of that 2006 approach would have unsparingly sought to figure out what worked and what did not, and revised accordingly. With few exceptions, however, the just released Field Manual (FM) 3-24/Marine Corp Warfighting Publication (MCWP) 3-33.5, *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies* (28 April 2014) does not reflect that kind of searching inquiry. Instead, the “new” doctrine is mostly just a somewhat updated and re-organized version of the same 2006 formula.

To be sure, there was much goodness in the 2006 manual, and a lot of that rightfully carries over into the revised FM 3-24. Of course, there are instances where, like its predecessor, the new doctrine seems to re-state the obvious. No doubt it is easy to become impatient with the new (actually, *any*) doctrine when confronted with repeated themes, but the reader should remember that it is designed for use by those who have not necessarily experienced all the events of the post-9/11 era. Doctrine documents, especially those with ambition for longevity, should assume readers with little or no familiarity with the material it addresses.

Still, the new doctrine represents - regrettably - a missed opportunity. Recent fears about [the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan](#) being forgotten are, in a way perhaps unintended, well-founded: the *right* lessons *are* being forgotten. Even worse, the *wrong* ones are being memorialized in documents like the new FM 3-24. What was needed was a fundamental rethinking of a land force approach to COIN in light of wars whose results are not just decidedly “[unsatisfying](#)” to military professionals, but also so disappointing to the American people that they now overwhelmingly believe the war in Afghanistan [was not worth fighting](#), and a growing majority ([52%](#)) have concluded that the U.S. mostly failed in Iraq.

In fairness, part of the problem of incorporating the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan, writ large, is beyond the purview of any doctrine manual writers: in Iraq, a *counterinsurgency* approach was employed to address what was, originally anyway, a *counter-terrorism* problem.

How did this happen? The thinking seems to have been that in order to prevent another attack like 9/11 (or worse, a WMD-enhanced strike), it was necessary to deprive terrorists of their bases and/or nation-state support. The “solution” therefore was to revamp entire countries vulnerable to being “hosts” for terrorist entities into economically-stable, Western-style democracies which, presumably, would be

decisively inhospitable to any terrorists who could threaten America or the rest of the world.

The execution of this herculean task fell (either deliberately or by default) principally to U.S. and allied *military* forces. As absurd as it seems, decision-makers also thought, evidently, that the societal transformations they deemed so essential could be accomplished in a relatively short timeframe, and at an acceptable cost in blood and treasure. Quite obviously, there were an abundance of mistaken assumptions in this approach, but it was enthusiastically implemented anyway.

As a result, it was not long before senior civilian and military leaders found themselves spouting such bromides as the mission in Iraq and/or Afghanistan was to “protect the [host nation] people”. In truth, the real mission, indeed the entire rationale for the war, was to protect the *American* people. That critical truth somehow got lost in the implementation of the 2006 doctrine, if not before.

Furthermore, the 2006 doctrine claimed that David Galula (a 1950s French officer and much ballyhooed as a counterinsurgency expert), had “wisely” noted that each “soldier must then be prepared to become...a social worker, a civil engineer, a schoolteacher, a nurse, [and] a boy scout.” Almost no one pointed out the ridiculousness of creating such expectations for the quintessential, 19 year-old American infantryman wielding a high school degree. How – indeed, *why* – should anyone have thought him able to accomplish tasks so diverse and complex that they **defied even highly-trained experts?**

Regardless, it still should have been apparent from the beginning that even if the national makeovers the decision-makers sought actually occurred, modern terrorists do not, in fact, need Iraq or Afghanistan as bases to pursue their goals. There were – and are - plenty of other available options.

Think about it: was it really so hard to foresee how easily terrorists could set up shop in any number of other troubled areas? Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen are just a few examples where they did just that. In other words, the entire premise of revamping a particular country as being *the* (or even “an”) answer to the challenge of suppressing terrorist threats to the U.S. has proven profoundly wrongheaded. It is just too easy for terrorist organizations to outflank it. This does not mean that COIN has no utility in countering terrorist operations; it simply means that it should be employed for that purpose only if clearly supported by a scrupulously objective cost/benefit analysis.

Does history help? Yes, but only to a point. The current FM 3-24 – like its predecessor – does reflect a far-reaching historical analysis of various counterinsurgencies. The post-World War II colonial wars, as well as Cold War-influenced Vietnam War, figure prominently in both doctrines. In a sense, this is one of their strengths as they do an excellent job at wringing doctrinal concepts from those conflicts. Military history has virtues all its own, and some its lessons are indeed immutable.

However, the doctrine’s approach also reveals flaws – in this instance, *fatal* flaws – of too much reliance on historical models. In the first place, the world has profoundly changed in the 40 to 50 years since the conflicts upon which the doctrines so heavily (albeit not exclusively) rely. The rise of persistent, high-tech surveillance, precision weaponry and, perhaps most importantly, a globalized, 24-hour news cycle enhanced by the proliferation of social media techniques, are just a few of examples of the revolutionary changes that have occurred. Any doctrinal document that fails to *fully* address these pivotal realities is, by definition, deficient – at least insofar as the *U.S.* military is concerned.

Herein lies the central problem with the new FM 3-24: however doctrinally suitable it may be for a generic counterinsurgency force – and it certainly may be exactly the right methodology for low-tech, indigenous forces - it is simply not the optimal approach for the *American* military. The doctrine simply does not adequately account for the technological culture of the U.S. and its armed forces. Colin Gray insightfully observes that **“High technology is the American way in warfare. It has to be. A high technology society cannot possibly prepare for, or attempt to fight, its wars in any other than a technology-led manner.”**

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Yet much like its forerunner, the new FM 3-24 remains decidedly – if not proudly – low-tech. True, there are a few desultory comments about, for example, cyber, but mainly as something insurgents might exploit as opposed to a capability in which the U.S. enjoys real advantages. Overall, the anti-technology flavor of the current doctrine’s predecessor mostly persists. For example, the 2006 manual was criticized for **marginalizing airpower into a five page section**, but the current version reduces even that meager treatment to a matter of just a few sentences, and largely dismisses it as a mere “enabler” of ground forces.

This makes it especially unfortunate that there was not more consideration of the role that technology has played in the recent success that the Colombian military has enjoyed against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The *Washington Post* reported last December that U.S.-supplied aircraft-delivered precision weapons “**helped Colombian forces kill at least two dozen rebel leaders**” leaving the insurgency “at its smallest and most vulnerable state in decades.”

Likewise, another **recent report** concludes that drone strikes in Pakistan are, in fact, “associated with decreases in the incidence and lethality of terrorist attacks, as well as decreases in particularly intimidating and deadly terrorist tactics, including suicide and improvised explosive devices (IED) attacks.” Given how IEDs bedeviled the Army and Marine Corps in Iraq and Afghanistan, these examples of how *today’s* technology presents opportunities to effectively counter insurgent capabilities without excessively risking ground troops should have been thoroughly investigated in the doctrine’s revision.

Regrettably, however, the “new” COIN doctrine seems stuck in a Cold War-era COIN model in which the solution must involve deploying massive numbers of soldiers and/or Marines to hostile foreign soil. To be sure, I am definitely not advocating a ‘technology *über alles*’ approach but rather I am merely suggesting that some of the fundamental premises of FM 3-24’s manpower-intensive, ground-centric approach deserve to be better informed by the technological possibilities of the 21st century. By failing to give such possibilities the opportunity they deserve, the new doctrine simply does not adequately align itself with what is, like it or not, what Colin Gray calls the “American way in warfare.”

Philosophically, it is surprising to this writer that the Marine Corps adopts this doctrine lock, stock, and barrel. One would think that the Corps’ dedication to air-ground integration, its expertise in the mobility advantages inherent in amphibious warfare, as well as other differences based on the Corps’ experience and service culture, might produce a distinct approach in at least a concept or two, but apparently not. Likewise, would not, for example, the Army’s airborne capabilities or **armor operations’ skills**, generate a couple of different ideas? This lack of differentiation may cause some to wonder: do we really need two land forces doing COIN? Indeed, if there is no doctrinal difference in this kind of warfighting, will people start questioning if America needs two land forces at all?

In any event, another key deficiency is the stubborn refusal of the doctrine to fully explore how the very presence of *American* ground forces can be particularly problematic to a counterinsurgency effort. True, the doctrine does mention, among a laundry list of causes of an insurgency, that the “presence of a foreign force can be the root cause of an insurgency.” But this broad generalization grossly underplays the reality that *American* forces specifically very often present complications for the host government far beyond the considerable difficulties that *any* foreign troops can pose.

Plainly, the physical presence of large numbers of a *superpower’s* military on the ground in a country creates certain issues fundamentally unlike those of the militaries of other countries, especially when there is a historical, cultural and political chasm between the nations involved. The failure in a doctrine aimed at *U.S.* ground forces to fully dissect the special complications associated with *American* boots-on-the-ground is no small defect.

The chapter entitled “Indirect Methods for Countering Insurgencies” is perhaps the most hopeful as it at least opens the door to a smaller U.S. footprint approach, mainly by emphasizing working through the host-nation and its forces. Although there is not as much creativity as one might hope, and the truth is that the sort of “indirect” approach outlined could easily involve a lot of American troops, it is nevertheless a step in the right direction. Big brains need to do more innovative thinking about the indirect approach to COIN as the American people are extremely unlikely to countenance much in the way of large-footprint, direct approaches in the foreseeable future. Let’s not forget that after Vietnam it was more than thirty years – an entire generation of soldiers and Marines - before the U.S. military needed to “remember” much about large, manpower-intensive COIN operations.

Of course, there are still plenty of important and valuable nuggets found in the new doctrine; indeed, the problem is that there are so many so diffused it is difficult to find the key ones as there too often is too little prioritization or contextual differentiation. While the doctrine does recognize different causes of insurgencies, it does too little to align counters that might be especially effective (or ineffective) against particular type. Moreover, the new doctrine does not appear to be sure if it wants to be a glorified collection of tactics, techniques, and procedures for warfighters, or a cerebral examination of the insurgency phenomena that could appeal, as was said of its predecessor, to **“northeastern graduate students,” that is, “a doctrine with particular appeal to people who would never own a gun.”**

Additionally, apparently anxious to avoid being accused of leaving something out, the doctrine allows almost every COIN-related hobby horse to make an appearance, typically without much scrutiny or reflection. Thus, the controversial human terrain team (HTT) concept appears, but without acknowledging the **very serious criticism** it has generated. (Should not FM 3-24 – or somebody – explain why a well-trained intelligence officer could not perform the HTT function?) Similarly, while the doctrine is spiked with ‘bumper sticker’ phrases like “whole of government” and “unified action partners”, a thoughtful - and brutally frank - analysis is wanting. Example? What is – or should be - the doctrinal approach when the rest of government fails to show up?

Additionally, so many qualifiers litter the doctrine’s landscape that the impact of significant concepts is undermined. Too many “may” this or “may” that can make any document seem too tentative and indecisive. Furthermore, important ideas can get confused. For example, the doctrine repeatedly calls for a “capable” host government, but then drifts into something of a chicken versus egg conundrum as to whether security permits a capable government to arise or a capable government is a prerequisite to a secure environment. If the answer is in FM 3-24 somewhere, it needs to be clearer.

Most maddening is the reprise from the 2006 manual of the *chic* and popular but ultimately meaningless “paradoxes” section. This is the rendition of a series of supposedly insightful phrases all premised with a qualifier like “some” or “sometimes” (e.g., “Sometimes, the More Force Is Used, the Less Effective It Is” and “Some of the Best Weapons for Counterinsurgents Do Not Shoot”). Of course, it is blindingly obvious that almost *anything* can be said if one qualifies it with the words “some” or “sometimes.” What then do you really have? While perhaps pleasing to linguistic *fashionistas* these no-context assertions are of little practical value, and are so amorphous as to carry real potential to be counter-productive.

Tucked into the very end of the document is a chapter on “Legal Considerations.” It is, unfortunately, a disappointing effort. It recites some perfunctory truisms about the law of armed conflict and related legal matters, but falls short of providing any real doctrinal analysis. What, for example, is the doctrine when the host nation and/or coalition partners are parties to international agreements that the U.S is not? Conform to the treaties anyway? Moreover, what is the doctrine when the host nation and/or coalition partners consider the insurgency not as matter governed by the law of armed conflict (as the U.S. is prone to do), but rather as a law enforcement situation? What if such a view could markedly increase risks to

U.S, troops?

The most puzzling feature of this chapter is the curiously restrained discussion of force discipline. The doctrine states simply that despite “rigorous selection and training, some personnel will commit infractions requiring discipline.” “Infractions”? Seriously? Abu Ghraib, Haditha, and Mahmudiya – not to mention SSgt Bales’ murderous rampage - were hardly “infractions.” What should have been explored is how devastating criminal activity can be to the overall COIN effort, and provide some doctrinal guidance as to how it might be robustly addressed.

Regardless, allow me to say this again definitively: there is much to commend about the new FM 3-24 (as there was about its predecessor). It is a “must read” for anyone seriously interested in COIN.

That said, it would be a mistake to think that FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 is anything more than a land-centric view. In fact, it explicitly states that the “U.S. Army and Marine Corps can prevent or defeat an insurgency across the range of military operations.” No need, it seems, for the Air Force, Navy or Coast Guard even though each has played a major role in the post-9/11 COIN efforts. As the doctrine barely pays lip service to jointness, it is not an especially attractive basis for real-world implementation in the next COIN challenge. One might hope that the recent **Joint Publication 3-24** would fill that bill but it too suffers from a lack of sufficient imagination.

All is not, however, lost. One of the central themes of the old FM 3-24, and repeated in the revised version, is the importance of learning to adapt. This is the real value of John Nagl’s classic book **Learning to Eat Soup with Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malay and Vietnam** that proved so influential to the 2006 version of FM 3-24. Whatever may be the deficiencies of this or that aspect of new FM 3-24, if we internalize the ability to creatively innovate, the American military will be well-served not just in COIN situations, but across the entire spectrum of conflict.

About the Author



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General Dunlap retired from the Air Force in June 2010, having attained the rank of major general during a 34-year career in the Judge Advocate Corps. In his capacity as deputy judge advocate general from May 2006 to March 2010, he assisted the judge advocate general in the professional supervision of more than 2,200 judge advocates, 350 civilian lawyers, 1,400 enlisted paralegals, and 500 civilians around the world. In addition to overseeing an array of military justice, operational, international, and civil law functions, he provided legal advice to the Air Staff and commanders at all levels.

In the course of his career, General Dunlap has been involved in various high-profile interagency and policy matters, highlighted by his testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives concerning the Military Commissions Act of 2006. General Dunlap previously served as staff judge advocate at Headquarters Air Combat Command at Langley Air Force Base in Virginia and at Headquarters Air Education and Training Command at Randolph Air Force Base in Texas, among other leadership posts. His other assignments include the faculty of the Air Force Judge Advocate General School where he taught various civil and criminal law topics. An experienced trial lawyer, he also spent two years as a military trial judge for a 22-state circuit. He served tours in the United Kingdom and Korea, and he deployed for operations in the Middle East and Africa, including those in support of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. He also led military-to-military delegations to Colombia, Uruguay, and the Czech Republic.

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