

Learning and Adapting to Win

By JOHN A. NAGL

There is no single defining American way of war. It changes over time, and it should change over time, adapting appropriately to the most relevant threats to our national security, and the means by which that security is best preserved. As the godfather of theory himself, Carl von Clausewitz, once observed, war is but an instrument of policy, beholden to it. And because policies change, the conduct of war must also change.

—Admiral Michael G. Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

Admiral Mullen highlights Clausewitz's dictum that war is *not* essentially "about death and destruction"² but is fundamentally an instrument of policy designed to achieve political aims. It is this understanding of war that must drive how military strategy and doctrine are developed, and the metric against which they must be judged. The counterinsurgency field manual must therefore be evaluated against its record in assisting in the accomplishment of national objectives.

It meets this test. Since the implementation of a coherent counterinsurgency campaign there, Iraq has seen a dramatic reduction in violence and a strengthening of the institutions necessary for self-government. There were multiple causes for this chain of events, including the Awakening movement, sectarian separation in Baghdad, and "cease-fire" initiatives by some insurgent groups, as well as the U.S. troop surge and new operational and tactical approaches enacted by Generals David Petraeus and Raymond Odierno. But these variables interacted with one another: the Awakening gained momentum after the surge was announced, and surge forces, once in place, reinforced sectarian separation and dissuaded insurgent groups from escalating hostilities.³

Critics contend that the implementation of a counterinsurgency campaign had nothing to do with what transpired in Iraq over the past 3 years, but it is no accident that the rediscovery of counterinsurgency principles culminating in the writing of Field Manual (FM) 3–24 coincided with this fairly dramatic reversal of fortune. By the end of 2006, Iraq was on the verge of civil war, while by the end of 2008, large swaths of Afghanistan were outside the reach of government. These failures did not occur because the United States did not kill enough insurgents in these conflicts; they hap-

pened because the United States and its allies failed to pursue coordinated, well-resourced counterinsurgency campaigns aimed at separating the militants from the population and strengthening the legitimacy of the Iraqi and Afghan governments.

FM 3–24 is no Bible; it is slated to be revisited and rewritten within the next year or so, since learning organizations must continuously adapt to the demands of ongoing conflict. The lead author of the previous effort, Conrad Crane, will also be involved in the next one; he has been carefully following the many lively discussions about FM 3–24 that have raged since its publication just over 3 years ago, after the most extensive doctrinal review process in Army history to that point.

In fact, we now know that Major General J.D. Thurman, then commanding the Fourth Infantry Division in combat in Baghdad, distributed the draft doctrine to all of his battalion and brigade commanders in the fall of 2006, while the manual was undergoing final revisions. Clearly, the writing of FM 3–24, after years of waging war in Afghanistan and Iraq, "drew on a vast amount of combat experience, often from the lower ranks of the [U.S.] Army, codified that experience into an operational doctrine, trained on it, and then put it into practice against the enemy."⁴ If this is not the first time in history when commanders literally under fire were given the opportunity to comment on pending doctrine, it is certainly proof that the net was spread very wide indeed while the manual was under revision.

The coming revision of FM 3–24 is unlikely to satisfy the criticisms of those who decry the doctrine's focus on the population, even those who perhaps understandably were "just too darn busy with carrying out a population-centric counterinsurgency campaign on the ground in west Baghdad in that

fall of 2006"⁵ to comment on the last version. There is simply too much historical evidence from the last century of counterinsurgency campaigns that securing and influencing the population, while messy and slow, are the only ways to succeed in these wars among the people. This approach is being tested on a daily basis in Afghanistan where, as Admiral Mullen recently noted:

[F]rankly the battlefield isn't necessarily a field anymore. It's in the minds of the people. It's what they believe to be true that matters. And when they believe that they are safer with Afghan and coalition troops in their midst and local governance at their service, they will resist the intimidation of the Taliban and refuse to permit their land from ever again becoming a safe haven for terror.⁶

Unfortunately, the debate over FM 3–24 has largely consisted of critics without an alternative course of action of their own complaining that no alternatives to population-centric counterinsurgency were considered. They have ignored the rich body of history written by many practitioners of population-centric counterinsurgency who have learned from their own experience in this kind of war. They range from David Galula in Algeria⁷ and Sir Robert Thompson in a number of British campaigns⁸ to current practitioners Dale Kuehl⁹ and Jim Crider,¹⁰ both of whom independently derived many of the same principles identified by Galula. The best practices from the historical record are similar to those used by the most successful commanders in our current campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan: counterinsurgency campaigns that focus first on protecting the population have a historically higher rate of success than those campaigns that do not.¹¹

Many critiques of the counterinsurgency manual have also fostered misconceptions

about what it really says. The core of the manual is its middle chapters, which cover sociocultural intelligence, campaign design using that information to determine problem sets, and then execution along logical lines of operation to achieve solutions. Perhaps the most important influence of FM 3–24 on American doctrine has been through that concept of design, a contribution from the Marines that has become a part of all subsequent doctrine. Campaign design compels commanders to apply different combinations of information activities and combat operations, along with efforts aimed at improving governance and the economy, all in pursuit of a locally defined legitimacy that will sustain popular support.¹² This complex and iterative plan must be conducted in concert with many partners. While most of those partners have not yet developed the same degree of proficiency that the Army and Marines have displayed in recent operations in Afghanistan, efforts to increase civilian counterinsurgency capacity continue.¹³

The process of campaign design allows U.S. forces to continually adapt to the demands of the neighborhood they are fighting in, determining the appropriate balance between killing the enemy and protecting the population on each block and at each moment. At times, the priority will be on combat operations, as it is currently in Navy operations against pirates in Somalia. At other times and in other places, the focus will be on training host-nation security forces, as it is in campaigns led by U.S. Special Forces in Yemen and Pakistan. In none of these three current theaters of conflict has the United States decided to conduct “an expeditionary campaign of multiple combat brigades dispersed out into the local population to protect them and win their hearts and their minds,”¹⁴ rendering the argument that large-scale counterinsurgency is “the only operational method that the American Army has in its doctrinal toolkit”¹⁵ demonstrably false. Large-scale counterinsurgency campaigns are an instrument in the Nation’s repertoire of different ways to apply force to achieve political objectives, but an extremely costly one that should not be used except when it is absolutely necessary to achieving vital national objectives.

But when large-scale counterinsurgency is required—as it was in Iraq after the destruction of Saddam Hussein’s government and the disbanding of his army, and as it is now in Afghanistan in support of President Hamid Karzai’s regime—the U.S. Armed

Forces must know how to practice large-scale counterinsurgency, and how to do it well. FM 3–24 is not perfect, but it has helped the Army and Marines understand and apply

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the principles of counterinsurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan, just as FM 100–5 helped the Army, Marines, and Air Force come to terms with the principles of AirLand Battle a generation ago. FM 3–24 underwent an extraordinarily extensive debate both during the writing process and afterward; those who did not have time to suggest alternative ways to defeat insurgents at the time of publication have had sufficient opportunity since. The manual’s focus on protecting the population has been battle-tested on a daily basis, and an upcoming revision will collect, analyze, and incorporate lessons from ongoing conflicts and from past campaigns to make good doctrine even better.

U.S. military doctrine, from FM 3–24 through FM 3–0 to Joint Publication 3–24, is flexible, adaptable, and well suited to the broad spectrum of threats America faces today. It frees the military from a misguided belief that there is a single U.S. way of war that is essentially “about death and destruction.” Instead, it teaches that the Army, and the Nation, must be able to fight and win along the entire spectrum of conflict, from conventional war against a conventional enemy to training and equipping the security forces of our friends and partners around the globe *before* an insurgency reaches a degree of virulence that demands a substantial U.S. troop deployment to subdue. This doctrinal revolution requires that all officers of all branches of the U.S. Government shed the intellectual straitjacket of a single American way of war and understand the complex reality of a world wherein we must apply all the tools of national power in many different ways to achieve the goals of our policy. The process of freeing ourselves from a limited understanding of the nature of war will be uncomfortable for some, but this discomfort is a necessary sacrifice if America’s Armed Forces are to uphold their solemn obligation to preserve the security of the American people. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Admiral Michael G. Mullen, “Landon Lecture Series Remarks,” March 3, 2010, available at <www.jcs.mil/speech.aspx?id=1336>.

² Gian P. Gentile, “Freeing the Army from the Counterinsurgency Straitjacket,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 58 (3^d Quarter, July 2010).

³ The author thanks Lieutenant Colonel Paul Yingling, USA, for this point.

⁴ Gentile.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Mullen.

⁷ David Galula, *Pacification in Algeria, 1956–1958* (Washington, DC: RAND, 2006); David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Praeger, 2006).

⁸ Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1978).

⁹ Kuehl’s 1–5 Cavalry relieved 8–10 Cavalry in Ameriyah in late 2006. See Dale Kuehl, “Testing Galula in Ameriyah: The People Are the Key,” *Military Review* (March–April 2009), available at <http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20090430_art012.pdf>. See also Linda Robinson, *Tell Me How This Ends: General David Petraeus and the Search for a Way Out of Iraq* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), especially chapter 9.

¹⁰ Jim Crider, *Inside the Surge: One Commander’s Lessons in Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2009), available at <www.cnas.org/node/974>; Jim Crider, “A View from Inside the Surge,” *Military Review* (March–April 2009), available at <http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20090430_art013.pdf>.

¹¹ The best practices from dozens of counterinsurgency campaigns have been compiled by Kalev “Gunner” Sepp, a veteran of the indirect approach in a counterinsurgency campaign in El Salvador. See Sepp, “Best Practices in Counterinsurgency,” *Military Review* (May–June 2005), available at <www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awgate/milreview/sepp.pdf>. See also Daniel Marston and Carter Malkasian, eds., who in *Counterinsurgency in Modern Warfare* (London: Osprey, 2008) dissect 11 counterinsurgency campaigns in search of common principles and lessons learned, including the current campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan.

¹² The author is indebted to Conrad Crane for this insight.

¹³ John A. Nagl, “The Expeditionary Imperative,” *The Wilson Quarterly* (Winter 2009), available at <http://wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=wq.essay&essay_id=501753&forumaction=forums.post>.

¹⁴ Gentile.

¹⁵ Ibid.