

Freeing the Army from the COUNTERINSURGENCY STRAITJACKET

By G I A N P . G E N T I L E

In October 2006, while in command of a cavalry squadron in northwest Baghdad, I received an email with an attached document from my division commander, then–Major General James D. Thurman. General Thurman sent the email to all of the division’s brigade and battalion commanders asking for input on the important document attached, which was a draft of Field Manual (FM) 3–24, *Counterinsurgency*. Over the next couple of weeks, I tried to read the draft manual closely and provide comments to the commanding general. Alas, though, like probably most of the other commanders, I was so busy carrying out a population-centric counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign on the ground in west Baghdad that I never found time to get to it. While anecdotal, my experience suggests a microcosm of the U.S. Army. The Army has been so busy since FM 3–24 came out 4 years ago that it has been unable to have a Service-wide dialogue on the manual.

It is time to have that debate. The COIN “experts,” some of whom were the writers of FM 3–24, often talk about how thoroughly the manual was debated and vetted. This may be true in the more narrow sense of a small cluster of senior officers, civilian academics, civilian pundits, and media personnel. But it was in no way debated and discussed and challenged, then taken apart and put back together, as was Army doctrine when the Army, no longer in combat, had the luxury to patiently and thoroughly deconstruct its doctrine between 1976 and 1982. During that period, over 110 articles were published in the Army’s professional journal, *Military Review*, that provoked a wide-ranging debate. We need a similar type of professional and wide-ranging discussion about FM 3–24, since we have had it as an operational doctrine in our hands for going on 4 years.

Both the field and the institutional Army have gained much experience over these past 4 years in actually fighting two major COIN campaigns. Should we not consider that experience and integrate it into a revised

doctrine for counterinsurgency? The German army in World War I went through major doctrinal introspection and then change after only 2 years of combat on the Western Front. It drew on a vast amount of combat experience (often from the lower ranks of the army), codified that experience into an operational doctrine, trained on it, and then put it into practice against the enemy.¹

It is troubling that the Army today, after nearly 4 years of experience in conducting major COIN campaigns, cannot see fit to revise the doctrine it has now. It is also troubling that some of the leading COIN experts and Army officers seem unwilling to accept the need for serious debate and the possibility

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of a fundamental revision of current doctrine. It is as if they have become so convinced of the efficacy and rightness of current Army COIN doctrine that they cannot imagine alternatives and revisions based on recent hard experience. In essence, and sadly, the Army seems to have lost the ability to think creatively.

FM 3–24 is not perfect, and it is not the Bible on counterinsurgency; its principles and methods are not timeless in warfare, and more importantly, they have not been shown to work in past and current operational practice as promised. But after listening to COIN experts, one comes away with the impression that the principles of COIN as laid out in FM 3–24 are irrefutable and that they must stay in place, without challenge. The experts often

hold as an incontrovertible rule that they believe these principles must be followed in *any* counterinsurgency: the people are the “prize,” or the center of gravity, and they *must* be protected.²

Carl von Clausewitz said that a center of gravity is something to be discovered, and it could vary depending on the aims of the war being fought.³ Yet the COIN experts essentially tell us that there is no need to discover a center of gravity or even an operational method because the rules of our current COIN doctrine have already done the discovering and planning for us. For instance, if there is one hard and fast prescription in our doctrine that must always be followed as a rule, it is that the people must always be protected because they are the “prize.” This concrete prescription therefore demands a specific operational method of large numbers of boots on the ground—doing “clear, hold, and build”—thereby winning hearts and minds. So, for example, when the President of the United States tells the Army to stop the pirates from coming out of Somalia, or to allow no more underwear bombers from Yemen, the only operational method that the Army has in its doctrinal toolkit is an expeditionary campaign of multiple combat brigades dispersed into the local population to protect them and win their hearts and their minds.

This is how being doctrinaire with counterinsurgency can lead to dogmatism—in other words, an inability to move beyond, when needed and called for, prescribed principles, methods, and rules. Unfortunately, the dogmatism of counterinsurgency has eclipsed strategy and, even more troublingly, shapes policy. To break out of this military dogmatism, FM 3–24 must be deconstructed and put back together but without the constraining proscriptions that in essence have been turned into rules and binding principles that have made current COIN doctrine so hidebound and straitjacketed.

The straitjacket of counterinsurgency makes it difficult to appreciate that it is

problematic whether or not the United States can achieve a positive strategic outcome with counterinsurgency in distant, foreign countries. Any temporary tactical advantage U.S. forces achieve with COIN, whether with force of arms or cash, does not translate into the creation of a stable, competent, and most important, legitimate pro-Western regime. On the contrary, as seen in both Iraq and Afghanistan, the practice of population-centric counterinsurgency not only cultivates an “expectations gap” between what the U.S. military can deliver with money and infrastructure projects and what the indigenous government can deliver. Counterinsurgency American style

Ironically, the historical case study that COIN experts focus on most to prove that better COIN methods can work—General Creighton Abrams and the Vietnam War—actually proves how essential firepower was to whatever success was enjoyed against the North Vietnamese and South Vietnamese communists. What pacified, albeit temporarily, the rural South Vietnamese countryside between 1969 and 1972 when General Abrams was in command was not better COIN programs and methods, but rather the death and destruction of military operations using firepower and the resultant either willing or forced depopulation of the countryside. And

php?storyId=90200038>; for a current example of this kind of formulaic thinking, see Michael T. Flynn, Matt Pottinger, and Paul D. Bachelor, “Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan,” Center for a New American Security, Washington, DC, January 2010, available at <www.cnas.org/files/documents/press/AfghanIntel_Flynn_Jan2010_code507_voices.pdf>.

³ For an excellent analysis of Clausewitz and “rules,” see Clifford J. Rogers, “Clausewitz, Genius, and the Rules,” *The Journal of Military History* 66 (October 2002), 1167–1176.

⁴ For two conflicting views in this regard, see Nir Rosen and Tom Ricks on the latter’s blog *The Best Defense*, “Nir Rosen: Stop the Iraq Madness,” February 23, 2010, available at <http://ricks.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/02/23/nir_rosen_stop_the_iraq_madness>.

⁵ On the atrophy of combined arms competencies, see Sean MacFarland, Michael Shields, and Jeffrey Snow, “The King and I: The Impending Crisis in Field Artillery’s Ability to Provide Fire Support to Maneuver Commanders,” available at <www.npr.org/documents/2008/may/artillery-whitepaper.pdf>.

⁶ In this regard, see John Arquilla, “The New Rules of War,” *Foreign Policy* (March–April 2010).

⁷ The stock explanation of the Vietnam War that argues that General Abrams had turned the war around and goes so far as to further suggest that it was actually won is found in Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America’s Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999). There is a large body of scholarship, however, that refutes the notion that changed American military tactics after 1968 and programs of pacification had pacified the countryside. See James Walker Trullinger, Jr., *Village at War: An Account of Revolution in Vietnam* (New York: Longman, 1980); Eric Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991); Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam’s Hearts and Minds* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995); David W.P. Elliot, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930–1975*, vols. 1 and 2 (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2003); and Thomas L. Ahern, Jr., *Vietnam Unclassified: The CIA and Counterinsurgency* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2010).

⁸ John A. Nagl, review of Brian McAllister Linn, *The Echo of Battle: The Army’s Way of War*, in *The RUSI Journal* 153 (April 2008), 82–83.

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also breeds its own opposition inside the indigenous population thanks to a large, unwanted U.S. military footprint. While advocates of American nationbuilding efforts might argue that Iraq has turned the corner and is on the path to peaceful reconciliation through the political process, recent reports of violence and serious and ongoing divisions in Iraqi society suggest that it is just too early to tell.⁴

The COIN straitjacket has produced within some circles in the Army and the greater defense establishment a rather curious way of thinking about firepower. It has come to be viewed as something dirty, bad, and to be avoided. This negative treatment combined with the COIN notion of learning and adapting toward better practices has replaced what should be the core principle of combined arms competencies. As a result, the Army’s warfighting skills have atrophied.⁵ We can expect, however, in the present and in the future that we will have to fight, and we also can expect to do many other things as well. Yet this never-ending drumbeat by COIN experts of learning and adapting only toward better methods has taken our eyes off the ball of combined arms competencies through the coordinated use of maneuver, intelligence, and firepower.

In a twist of circumstances, one might even conclude that COIN experts have no intention or possibility of really learning or adapting because they seem to presume to know what the wars of the future will be, and they have determined the best way to fight them.⁶

General Abrams was fully aware, along with his commanders and staff, that it was American air-delivered firepower that underwrote pacification programs and the ongoing Vietnamization of the war.⁷

War essentially is about death and destruction, its hard hand. Unfortunately, the dogma of counterinsurgency has seduced folks inside and outside the American defense establishment into thinking that instead of war and the application of military force being used as a last resort and with restraint, it should be used at the start and that it can change “entire societies” for the better.⁸ To be sure, the Army must be proficient at counterinsurgency and nationbuilding, but more importantly, it must maintain intellectual rigor. Seriously debating and challenging current operational doctrine is hard while fighting a war at the same time, but it is not impossible—and it is an absolute necessity. Perhaps the Army needs to find the time to do it now. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ On the German army, see Timothy Lupfer, *The Dynamics of Doctrine: The Changes in German Tactical Doctrine During the First World War* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 1981); and Bruce I. Gudmundson, *Stormtroop Tactics: Innovation in the German Army, 1914–1918* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1989).

² Statement by Peter Mansoor in audio of Guy Raz, National Public Radio, “Army Focus on Counterinsurgency Debated Within,” May 6, 2008, available at <www.npr.org/templates/story/story.