Crafting a New Counterinsurgency Doctrine

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THE ARMY AND MARINE CORPS' NEW COUNTER-INSURGENCY DOCTRINE COULD BE THE BASIS FOR AN EFFECTIVE CAMPAIGN AGAINST TERRORISM.

By Sarah Sewall

The U.S. government has articulated a concept of operations for the defeat of terrorism: help partners combat violent extremist organizations, deter support for those organizations, and erode support for extremist ideologies. But the United States has yet to develop effective tools and policies for accomplishing these goals. Counterterrorism efforts have not been integrated into, or used to frame, a broader and coherent national security strategy. And while President Bush acknowledges an "ideological struggle," American efforts in that arena have often proved counterproductive.

In its campaign against terrorism, human rights are the West's heraldry. Respect for them distinguishes the United States from extremists of almost any brand. Yet human rights are under siege at home and undermined by much of America's behavior abroad, weakening the moral and ideological basis of the struggle against violent extremism.

It may surprise many, then, that the Army and Marine Corps have raised the banner of human rights in their new counterinsurgency doctrine. The question is whether the rest of the U.S. government — in particular foreign affairs and national security professionals — will leverage the field manual's principles into a broader campaign against terrorism that protects core human rights regardless of faith or nationality.

The Army and Marine Corps doctrine offers the most strategic approach to terrorism currently available within the U.S. government; it is no coincidence that the doctrine revolves around rights of foreign civilians. Field Manual 3-24, as it is generally known, honestly catalogs the costs and requirements of civilian protection and nationbuilding in pursuit of stability. It demands a parallel and overarching national policy for strengthening states against revolutionary challengers, a policy that will, in turn, lead to the development of adequate military and civilian resources to meet that challenge.

But the obstacles are enormous. First, the American public has grown weary of Iraq and appears to conflate that war with counterinsurgency more broadly (even though the field manual's subtext cautions against preemptive regime change). Administration officials do not want to admit their failings in Afghanistan and Iraq, which is the first step toward necessary change in national policy. Civil servants are understandably wary of being pressed into the service of "more Iraqs." And interagency squabbling and parochialism have drained the intellectual coherence and utility from the bureaucracy's efforts.

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Because the issues are complex and highly politicized, sound national counterinsurgency policy is not likely to be developed within, or sold by, this administration. Rather, a national bipartisan commission is needed to craft an effective national framework and garner the capabilities to support it in the decades ahead.

A New Security Paradigm: It's Stability, Stupid

During the 1990s, the Clinton administration began to recognize that failed states and chronic instability ultimately threatened international, and therefore American, security interests. While a peer competitor remained a distant possibility, global crises and headlines arose from state weakness, not state strength. Previously masked by Cold War stasis, the corrosion within the international system accelerated, fueled by globalization's inequities, developing technologies and social trends.

Complex military and civilian peace operations and nationbuilding efforts were intended to repair the expanding holes in a fraying international fabric. But this proved to be challenging, expensive and endless work, without quick gratification; and a skeptical Congress didn't buy the linkage between failed states and American security. The public had expected the collapse of Soviet communism to produce a security dividend, not a bill. So in 2000, Americans elected a president who derided nationbuilding, calling it counter to American interests.

The events of 9/11, and subsequent pursuit of al-Qaida in the skeletal state of Afghanistan, ought to have chastened those who dismissed the costs of failed states and disorder. The higher stakes are now apparent. In fact, the marriage of ideological extremism with weapons of mass destruction threatens not just nation-states, but the politics, commerce and perhaps the very cohesion of the modern interstate system.

Violent extremists increasingly function not simply as insurgents within states but also as revolutionaries within the international system, with ambitions and targets that transcend national boundaries. They take root within states, threatening the political order or simply thriving in a governance vacuum. Confronting terrorism requires strengthening governments so that they can combat violent and subversive movements and restore order. This is, effectively, counterinsurgency: "Those military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological and civic actions

taken by a government to defeat insurgency," as the new doctrine defines it.

The goal would be to make states strong enough to police internal violence pursuant to their domestic laws. A state stabilization strategy would help contain violent extremism locally, eliminate terrorist safe havens, and disrupt the global networks that are force multipliers of terrorism. Thus the new counterinsurgency doctrine is, in turn, central to a broader national security strategy.

Building a consensus about U.S. security strategy — not simply its goals, but the way we will achieve them — is particularly vital at this political moment. The endgame in Iraq risks pushing Americans toward policy extremes, just as Vietnam produced a backlash on both the left and right. But today, neither unconstrained and exclusive use of military power abroad, nor a retreat to isolationism and homeland defense, is the answer to the global terrorist challenge. Neither approach can make Americans safer while representing our values in an ideological struggle. The new counterinsurgency manual offers an alternative, more productive approach.

Fighting "Right:" Field Manual 3-24

A counterinsurgency effort, as the military doctrine explains, is primarily political. It requires civilian direction and participation to achieve political effects. The armed forces play a critical, but supporting, role in operations that also include economic, social, informational and political initiatives. Indeed, the need for military power decreases as the counterinsurgents make progress against their insurgent enemies. This dance of nonmilitary and military efforts in pursuit of political aims requires planning, resources and choreography.

Participants therefore need an overarching policy that defines the purposes of counterinsurgency, clarifies U.S. government assumptions about the effort, and articulates the demands and expectations of each participant. The supporting military doctrine, like that from every other participant in the effort, should flow from that national policy. At present, the U.S. has it backward. There is no national counterinsurgency policy. And, stuck with the hot potatoes of Afghanistan and Iraq, military authorities sought to fill the vacuum with a new field manual.

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In light of the U.S. military's glorification of firepower and force protection, Field Manual 3-24 may come to be seen as a watershed. The new doctrine flatly rejects the notion that brute force succeeds and argues for a more humane approach, one that ensures the physical security of civilians and Geneva Convention protections for prisoners. It dictates that soldiers and Marines must assume greater risk on behalf of civilians. It commits the U.S. military to fighting pursuant to the laws of war, even when the enemy does not.

The doctrine recognizes that only by rejecting the foe's terrorist tactics can the U.S. claim the moral high ground. It is certainly true that the avowed enemies of America don't care how cleanly we fight; in fact, their strategy is to provoke U.S. excess and fulfill Samuel Huntington's prophesied "clash of civilizations." But the center of gravity today is the unconvinced moderate middle — whether among the indigenous population, Muslims, allies or Americans. Courting these audiences requires sustaining a commitment — however imperfect in practice — to moral warfare.

Here the distinction between combatant and noncombatant is critical. Physical security is a core human right, and civilian protection is a central precept of international law. Without it, we have no claim to outrage against terror. Nor can we win a struggle against violent radicals if moderate Muslims perceive our actions as indistinguishable from the terrorists' acts. Failure to underscore this distinction — through its choices of wars and targets, overweening reliance on military power, and ineffective nationbuilding — has been a signal U.S. failure in the ideological struggle against terrorism.

Yet while the administration gambles away civil liberties at home and abandons human rights abroad, the U.S. military has recommitted itself to protecting the rights of foreign citizens of all nationalities and faiths. Certainly this is only what international law requires. But who can take such norms for granted these days? Precisely because it runs counter to the administration's overall no-holds-barred, destroy-the-village-to-save-it approach to counterterrorism, the doctrine is radical and its future is uncertain.

Thus, the new approach needs tending and support by civilians to make sure it is implemented. This will require

support from above (through policy and politics in Washington) and from below or alongside (through expanded capacity and partners in the field). The military's success ultimately will depend upon whether or not the civilian foreign affairs and national security communities define a congruent national counterinsurgency policy, identify their stake in its success, and help to shape and define it.

Needed: A National Policy

There are many urgent policy questions that military doctrine alone simply cannot address. The single most important of these is whether or not counterinsurgency will be used to support a revolutionary grand strategy — namely, destroying or transforming states. Such a purpose would contort counterinsurgency's very nature. As a method for stabilizing governments by enhancing their legitimacy, counterinsurgency is self-evidently not suited to destroying and replacing existing political systems. This unanswered question should be the core of a broader debate about U.S. national security strategy.

Given recent experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq, it is understandable that the bureaucracy and public suspect that better counterinsurgency tools will be used offensively against governments, rather than defensively to support or mend them. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's "transformational diplomacy" initiative, too, seems to beg this question. Indeed, the prospect that counterinsurgency concepts and capabilities would be dedicated to regime change is sufficiently controversial, both conceptually and politically, that it impedes efforts to improve U.S. practice. Before civilians build counterinsurgency capability, they want to know what it is for.

A national policy should tackle this larger issue head-on, delineating the purposes underlying it and identifying circumstances in which the principles underlying it are most likely to succeed. The policy should also provide guidelines regarding the character of U.S. nationbuilding. Certainly if the goal is to support the host nation — instead of redesigning it in America's image — the local government's own values and choices should guide U.S. activities.

The urgent need to achieve stability may force compromises in other areas. A counterinsurgency policy should force U.S. agencies to revisit their usual ways of doing business in the political, economic and social spheres. Everything from accounting procedures and legal authorities to the substantive goals underlying nationbuilding programs may need rethinking. The Speaking Out column in the June *FSJ* noted USAID's reluctance to support Afghan government programs to create "model schools," efforts the U.S. military backs to undermine the radical Islamic religious schools (madrassas). But the government schools would also have religious content, and USAID is wary of funding them in light of the U.S. Constitution's Establishment Clause. Such sensibilities may be an unaffordable luxury when concern about insurgent violence is paramount.

Likewise, U.S. agencies may need to abandon traditional political orthodoxies. Early elections, for example, can be destabilizing and divisive. Privatization can disrupt services and cause social and economic dislocation. Four years into the Iraq War, the State and Defense Departments and the military and embassy in the field are still bickering about economic policy, the relationship of security to political reform, and the relative power of military and civilian officials. We have seen how tensions within the U.S. government — often between the military and civilian agencies — can prevent a coherent and unified counterinsurgency effort. A national policy should provide guidance that can minimize such enervating disputes.

There are more problematic normative issues — ultimately human rights questions — for a national counterinsurgency policy to consider. What should the United States do when indigenous programs or policies run counter to U.S. standards? Field Manual 3-24 accepts, in the words of T.E. Lawrence (aka Lawrence of Arabia), that it is better for the locals to do something tolerably well than for the counterinsurgent to do it for them. At what point, though, is the locals' behavior no longer tolerable? Will the line be drawn at local violations or when violations are national policy? When do the consequences of withdrawing U.S. support risk greater rights violations?

These are among the toughest questions in counterinsurgency, and civilians must take responsibility for grappling with them. A national policy should articulate the problem and offer guidelines for navigating these sensitive differences between local human rights standards and international or U.S. expectations.

Left to their own devices without policy guidance, military forces must muddle through these issues. Generally this entails defaulting to the most direct, and often short-term, route to stability — working with the local power

brokers rather than holding elections, for example, or paying young men for public works projects to get them off the street. This can result in friction when civilians see such efforts as properly non-military tasks or as inconsistent with established procedures. National policy can help reduce this friction by defining counterinsurgency's purpose and character, as well as the easier task of determining (at least on paper) who calls which shots when. But it must also face the underlying issue of civilian ability to take on its assigned tasks.

Civilian Leadership and Capacity

In the same axiomatic way that counterinsurgency doctrine cannot be revolutionary, it cannot be militarized. By definition a predominantly political affair, counterinsurgency demands civilian leadership and action to achieve its fundamental purpose. Yet within the U.S. government, this has been largely a rhetorical conceit.

Civilians have been grossly under-resourced for the enormous demands made of them in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere. This problem extends beyond bench strength to include the ability to plan and conduct operations. Many agencies have simply become contracting organizations, having lost the operational art entirely. And as we have seen in Iraq, contractors are not the perfect solution. Shrinking government in the name of efficiency means losing capacity, whether in development work or information operations.

The State Department has sought additional financing and related expertise, as the creation of the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization indicates. Even this partial success appears stillborn, though. For all the counterinsurgency demands it has created, the Bush administration appears uninterested in fighting to fund and staff them.

Understandably, there is also ambivalence within civilian agencies about counterinsurgency. The bureaucracy seems supportive of nationbuilding when it is executed after a conflict, preferably with a U.N. mandate and plenty of multinational partners. But what about nationbuild-

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ing during a conflict? The Secretary of State had to ask DOD to fill the civilian billets on Iraq Provincial Reconstruction Teams. Was this the result of a lack of eligible professionals, the politics of the Iraq War, or a broader disinclination, however sound, to assume physical risk?

The State Department's reluctant edging toward directed assignments adumbrates the larger challenge. Terrorism has already made serving abroad a much higher-risk proposition; counterinsurgency only expands the risks for civilians. It provides little comfort to non-combatants that the new Field Manual also demands more risk from soldiers. The Foreign Service has a great tradition of brave service in conflict zones. Yet if it cannot meet needs in the field, it risks irrelevance to the policies that matter most. If it stands aloof, it may come to regret ceding counterinsurgency to the military or watching the emergence of an expeditionary civilian capacity that creates policy through its actions on the ground.

Another aspect of enhancing civilian leadership is creating a new — or, arguably, reviving an older — breed of Foreign Service officer, one steeped in military culture and familiar with the possibilities and limits of military power. Professional specialization and broader trends in civil-military affairs have divorced civilians from their uniformed counterparts. The military's size and commitment to education have allowed its officer corps to become far more conversant with civilian institutions and culture than vice versa. Civilian agencies must address this deficit.

Thanks to two long-running wars, the nub of such a cadre is beginning to emerge. But there are few institutional processes for recognizing, nurturing and judiciously employing these pol-mil hybrids.

Finally, the fact that civilian authorities have not been fully honest about the limits of their capacity is a lingering problem. They have sometimes masked their shortfalls with critiques of the military's operational overreach and its failure to provide them with security. They have insisted upon retaining prerogatives even when they cannot carry out the corollary work.

Perhaps the executive agency bureaucracies fear that the truth will render them irrelevant to policymaking. But perpetuating the myth of civilian partnership enables decisionmakers to eschew responsibility for building civilian capacity. Brutal honesty may be the only way to catalyze change. Still, civilians won't be able to convince anyone to make the changes and finance the huge investment required unless counterinsurgency fits into a compelling national security strategy.

Interagency Process Stalled

In September 2006, the State Department (with cosponsorship from the Defense Department) hosted a conference on "Counterinsurgency in the 21st Century: Creating a National Framework." It brought together a who's who of players in U.S. counterinsurgency. Using the newly completed military doctrine as a springboard, the conveners sought to create a national counterinsurgency center and a plan for developing policy.

Interagency processes are difficult enough when most participants agree on the general goal but disagree about the way to accomplish it. The counterinsurgency policy effort appeared to lack consensus on both fronts. From the start, there was confusion about its purposes. Is this policy intended to guide more large-scale invasions such as Iraq, or small-scale efforts with friendly governments like the Philippines? Is it a complement to counterterrorism strategy or its replacement?

Participants were also unsure how their agencies fit into the policy. USAID officials claim a role in development and conflict prevention; S/CRS describes its focus as stability operations; other departments and agencies, such as Treasury and Agriculture, are comfortable contributing to nationbuilding. But counterinsurgency? One can imagine officials asking themselves: How is this different from what my agency already does? Will it require us to change? These distinctions are more than semantic, reflecting assumptions about legitimacy, partners, resources and levels of violence. Moreover, they have yet to be answered.

Much of this dysfunction is familiar to any veteran of government. In the Lake Wobegon interagency process, everyone is more important than average. The key issue is who's in charge, not what they should do. More energy is spent explaining whose efforts are fundamental than how they will be carried out. Competencies are cataloged, not assessed. No shortfalls are identified. The orientation is procedural (this is how we will plan), not substantive (these are our operating principles). The same stovepipes that contribute to dysfunction in the field are replicated in the policy process.

The policy review faces other challenges. Administration officials are preoccupied with the actual conduct of

counterinsurgency. It's difficult to fix the track while the train is moving; but when the fixes require acknowledging mistakes, it's even harder. Many key officials have moved on, and no one new has taken the reins. The upcoming presidential election also reduces incentives for the bureaucracy to really invest, because a new team may well demand its own policies.

Sadly, this threatens to leave the new Army and Marine Corps Field Manual in a vacuum. In outlining a practice of the good fight, it provides more than military doctrine. It suggests how to fight and win the "ideological struggle:" enshrine civilian protection, restrain the use of military power, and recognize the primacy of politics. It offers the rest of the government an opportunity to recalibrate its approach to terrorism and even its national security strategy. What a missed opportunity, then, if civilians fail to build upon it.

Moreover, the Field Manual faces an uphill fight even within the Army and Marine Corps. It has yet to be applied overseas, in part because of insufficient capacities on both the military and civilian sides. Turning away from the doctrine could tempt reversion to a simpler approach to fighting insurgency, one of unfettered military power — the Vietnam War that some wish they could have fought — and unfettered military authority, freed of political cognizance and coordination with civilians.

The Way Ahead: A Bipartisan Commission

Perhaps the issues are, at the moment, too complex and politicized to be left to the interagency process — particularly in the final quarter of this administration. But they are also too important to await a new president. Indeed, they should be part of the electoral debate about the purposes and character of America's role in the world and the next administration's national security policy.

For these reasons, the president and Congress should establish a national bipartisan commission to craft a national counterinsurgency policy. It should be led by former senior officials who have earned respect across

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the aisles, and should include national security professionals of high stature. The panel should clarify when and why counterinsurgency serves the national interest and spell out the capabilities required to support it.

The policy must address meaty and nettlesome issues that Iraq raises, but doesn't answer — questions that are vital for thinking about a broader national security strategy in the decade ahead. Will counterinsurgency capacity be used to topple and replace governments in the name of Western values, or will it be used to stabilize fragile regimes whose opponents would be far less palatable to Western interests? What criteria should the United States use to assess whether a state deserves — or continues to deserve — U.S. support? What accommodations to indigenous concepts of governance, human rights and economic organization can the U.S. accept? When does counterinsurgency become plain old war? This effort needs courage and intellectual coherence, not lowest-common-denominator consensus.

The commission should include representatives from the relevant agencies, including the military services that have labored so hard to get this policy ball rolling. But it must be led by experienced individuals who are no longer captive to party or position. It needs meaningful support from Congress. Only recommendations from an external bipartisan group like the Iraq Study Group have any chance of serious consideration during the 2008 presidential campaign and beyond.

The battle against terrorism is part of a broader struggle to sustain the international system and states within it. The United States currently lacks a coherent approach to addressing either challenge. Though it cannot fully substitute for a thoughtful and sustainable American national security strategy that applies adequate U.S. resources toward attainable ends, a national counterinsurgency policy can help fill a conceptual void, recommit the nation to the right side of an ideological struggle, allow for unity of purpose across the government, and help restore the U.S. as a human rights standard-bearer through the challenging times ahead. ■

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