

Forum

Progress, Dissent and Counter-Insurgency: An Exchange

Editor's note

In the August–September 2009 issue of *Survival* (vol. 51, no. 4, pp. 31–48), Philipp Rotmann, David Tohn and Jaron Wharton argued that the US military's change to a counter-insurgency posture in the on-going conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq was catalysed by two products of an institutional culture that strove to be self-learning: the response of junior leadership to tactical problems and senior institutional dissidents driving deep, controversial changes in doctrine and culture. In this *Survival* Exchange two experts offer US and European perspectives on the authors' argument and recommendations to preserve and advance this dynamic in anticipation of future requirements for rapid change. A response from Rotmann, Tohn and Wharton concludes the debate.

Learning, Adapting and the Perils of the New Counter-insurgency

Gian P. Gentile

The essay 'Learning Under Fire: Progress and Dissent in the US Military' by Philipp Rotmann, David Tohn and Jaron Wharton is a perfect exposition of the current paradigm of war that the US Army has, over the last three years, come to embrace. For those who want to understand how the American army thinks about itself and about war and conflict in general, this essay is the place to start.

The authors set out all the stock explanations for the US Army's failings at counter-insurgency over the last 40 years and its recent triumphal suc-

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cesses in Iraq following the 'surge' of troops that started in February 2007, and the promise of carrying that triumph through to Afghanistan. Their essential argument is that efforts to bring about change within a hidebound, conventionally minded army by a band of hard-charging, Young Turk army officers currently fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan combined with a move from the top by certain inspired senior officers who also wanted to change the recalcitrant army. The combination of these groups enveloped, from top to bottom, an American army that, the authors suggest, only wanted to fight 'big-battle' conflicts such as the Second World War and *Operation Desert Storm* (1991). These two groups, however, shocked the big-battle army into a phase of deep learning so that the US Army, along with other parts of the US military, is now on the right track. In short, the essay is a tale of an army that figured out how to learn, adapt and win at counter-insurgency.

The thrust of the authors' argument is the necessity for an army, as an organisation, to 'learn and adapt' at the tactical, operational and strategic levels while engaged in conflict. And with the introduction of the US Army's new counter-insurgency doctrine, Field Manual (FM) 3-24, put into practice by the inspired senior leadership of General David Petraeus, the US Army turned on a dime, and as a result succeeded in Iraq. The authors trot out, as exceptional cases of the counter-insurgency 'gets it' club, H.R. McMaster's 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment in Tal Afar in 2005 and Sean McFarland's 1st Brigade, 1st Armored Division in Ramadi in 2006, which adopted better counter-insurgency practices prior to Petraeus and the surge. In contrast, in the authors' view (shared by counter-insurgency expert Thomas Ricks), the majority of other army units prior to February 2007 dreamt rather of fighting a reincarnated Soviet army in the Sunni Triangle.¹ Officers such as Petraeus, McMaster and McFarland seem to personify the ability to 'learn and adapt'. In fact one can argue that this organisational mindset has taken over the US Army and other parts of the military. Yet there are deep, fundamental and potentially dangerous flaws with this paradigm that Rotmann, Tohn and Wharton overlook in their zeal to portray the positive.

Any military engaged in combat must, of course, learn and adapt; only a fool would argue otherwise. What great captains of past wars, both regular and irregular, failed to grasp that they had to adapt in the face of a hostile

enemy force at all levels of war in order to succeed? King Frederick II of Prussia, known as 'Frederick the Great', made critical errors at the battle of Mollwitz in 1741 with the tactical disposition of his army, and learned from that battle and others the importance of terrain selection and an appreciation for tactical flexibility and combined arms in combat. American combat battalions facing staunch German infantry opposition in the hedgerows of Normandy in summer 1944 adapted through tactical innovation and under inspired leadership from generals such as Norm 'Dutch' Cota. The US Army in Iraq in spring and summer 2003 very quickly shifted from major combat operations against Saddam Hussein's army to full-spectrum operations, and by the end of 2003 were also employing best practices for counter-insurgency.² Armies that do not learn and adapt, however, can suffer catastrophic defeat, as the French Army did in June 1940 when it tried to halt the German onslaught with an army built on flawed lessons drawn from the First World War.

So what allows successful armies to learn and adapt quickly to the problems that confront them? History shows that this ability has not been driven by a paradigmatic mindset, but rather by grounding in the core competencies of combined-arms fighting at all organisational levels. Armies learned and adapted because they knew how to fight, because they knew how to combine arms in the

face of hostile enemy foes. From the core competencies of combined-arms warfare comes the inherent ability to gain and maintain the initiative, and from the initiative – the ability to act first – comes the ability to adapt. The process does not work in reverse, yet Rotmann, Tohn and Wharton seem to think that accepting the paradigm, along with all its concomitant theories of organisational change, myths of past counter-insurgency campaigns and hagiographic generals, will be enough for success in future conflicts.

The idea of learning and adapting has placed the US Army in a conceptual straitjacket. While the driving theme of a previous US Army doctrinal manual from 1986 was how to gain the initiative, as Conrad Crane, one of the principle authors of FM 3-24, has stated, the driving theme throughout this vaunted doctrine is for the army to be able to 'learn and adapt'.³

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But the problem is that this must perforce be in the direction of better population-centric counter-insurgency, which in practice is nation building at the barrel of American guns. The rules of the paradigm do not allow a reverse gear; a military organisation cannot learn and adapt its way out of doing population-centric counter-insurgency. Given the permeating effect of the paradigm as put forward by FM 3-24 on the rest of the US Army, this is worrisome indeed: it has dangerously eclipsed America's ability to develop strategy.

Petraeus recently noted the differences between Iraq and Afghanistan, but in the same breath he said the principles of counter-insurgency 'learned' in Iraq (starting, naturally, after February 2007) are applicable to Afghanistan.⁴ The United States has thus devolved to a strategy of tactics, allowing tactics and operations to eclipse strategy and the consideration of alternatives. As Chinese philosopher Sun Tzu put it, 'strategy without tactics is the slow road to victory', but 'tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat'.⁵ Essays such as Rotmann, Tohn and Wharton's that present the idea of creativity, adaptability and initiative through the paradigm of an army that learns and adapts are, paradoxically, examples of how hidebound and straitjacketed the US Army has become toward its new way of counter-insurgency warfare.

The American army needs to get back to basics. Of course it needs to learn and adapt, but first and foremost it must be able to fight through combined-arms competencies. Rotmann, Tohn and Wharton, like so many others of the counter-insurgency persuasion, want to make the US Army feel guilty about its competencies to fight conventional wars, because they believe it was that very ability that made it difficult to conduct counter-insurgency and stability operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. But armies that are trained and proficient in combined-arms warfare are more able to adapt to counter-insurgency and other forms of irregular warfare than the other way around. Israel's experience in south Lebanon in summer 2006 shows what happens to an army when it focuses over-much on counter-insurgency warfare and loses the ability to combine arms. All the learning and adapting in the world could not get Israeli combat units up and moving once entangled with a Hizbullah enemy that stood and fought. If it is not

careful, the US Army is heading down the same road with its fetishisation of learning and adapting.

Notes

- 1 See Thomas Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2006).
- 2 See Donald P. Wright and Timothy R. Reese, *On Point II: Transition to the New Campaign. The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom, May 2003–January 2005* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2008).
- 3 For the 1986 manual, see Huba Wass de Czege and L.D. Holder, 'The New FM 100-5', *Military Review*, June 1982. For FM 3-24, see Department of the Army, *Field Manual 3-24, Counterinsurgency* (Washington DC, Headquarters Department of the Army, 2006); also Conrad Crane, personal communication. Holder and Crane were principal authors on the respective manuals.
- 4 From Fred W. Baker III, 'Petraeus Parallels Iraq, Afghanistan Strategies', American Forces Press Service, 28 April 2009.
- 5 Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (London: Oxford University Press, 1963).

Counter-insurgency and the Allies

Thomas Rid

Philipp Rotmann, David Tohn and Jaron Wharton argue that two 'active ingredients' have critically contributed to the US military's successes in Iraq: the 'happy coincidence' of a 'proactive' and empowered junior cadre, and a senior cadre of 'institutional dissidents'. Together these groups helped turn the armed services into a 'self-learning organisation'. To bring about the necessary innovation in counter-insurgency doctrine and practice, 'it took activism from both ends of the leadership spectrum to force the middle to change'. The practical success of these organisational and doctrinal changes will be 'tested' in Afghanistan.

Institutionally, the US Army and Marine Corps still seem to be less adapted to counter-insurgency than the authors imply. Discussions and doctrines on counter-insurgency are one thing, implementing these principles while being shot at is another. Yet their argument has a lot of merit. And it highlights a development with important consequences for America's European allies. Can the same happy coincidence be replicated in Britain's or Germany's armed forces? The answer has to grapple with an aspect of both wars neglected by the authors. Empowered and innovative commanders have made the US military more effective, but so did a *laissez-faire* approach by Washington's political elite at home

and an inept enemy in the field in Iraq. The three combined reasons make it unlikely that America's allies can duplicate the counter-insurgency revolution in Afghanistan.

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The security situation in Iraq deteriorated steeply in the three years following the invasion. Increasing numbers of casualties, both military and civilian and both American and Iraqi, increased the pressure to adapt and act. The 'surge', as Thomas Ricks and others have chronicled, happened perhaps not despite but because of a political leadership that seemed unsure what to do. Neither George W. Bush's White House nor the Pentagon under Donald Rumsfeld seem to have been where a new strategy for Iraq, or rather a new

operational approach to counter the insurgency, was hatched.¹ Instead, in the critical phases of the Iraq War, not only the execution of strategy but also a great deal of the critical decision-making and the overall design of national security policy increasingly devolved to military commanders. The surge could be seen, to put it more provocatively, as the outcome of a beneficial crisis in civil-military relations.

When the administration of President Barack Obama took office, it fulfilled one of the new president's campaign promises and shifted attention from the seemingly successful 'bad' war in Iraq to the deteriorating but 'good' war in Afghanistan. But while Obama's civilian national-security team was new to the job and relatively unfamiliar with the on-going operations, the opposite was true for the military establishment.² Its most prominent gener-

als, David Petraeus and Stanley McChrystal, exuded a near-heroic authority in national-security affairs that the White House had difficulty countering. When some senior military officials took the discussion about the best strategy for Afghanistan public, both anonymously and with attribution, they put the nation's civilian decision-makers under notable political pressure to follow their advice, perhaps even to the point of raising serious questions of civil-military oversight in a twenty-first-century counter-insurgency environment.³

This situation contrasts sharply with the non-American part of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Europe's armies cannot match America's resources in men, materiel and money, and most NATO armies are already at the limit of what they can contribute in Afghanistan. But logistical limitations are only one side of the coin. In no other country of the Atlantic Alliance do generals and admirals and their current and former staffs have comparable influence on national policymaking and the surrounding debates. Military establishments in Europe tend to be much weaker politically, while the public tends to be more sceptical of counter-insurgency and the opposition parties in national parliaments less supportive. This could spell trouble for NATO. The more the operation in Afghanistan is Americanised, the more likely the Atlantic Alliance will find itself headed towards a wicked dilemma: in the case of failure, Americans will find it hard to not to blame allies; in the case of success, many US officers might conclude that they succeeded not because of allied help, but in spite of it.⁴

Perhaps even more importantly, the enemy in Iraq unwittingly played into the hands of the coalition. The success of the surge was, to some extent, the outcome of a development that started even before the strategic and doctrinal reorientation of US land operations. The 'Awakening' movement that spread across Baghdad and Iraq started in Anbar Province, where the attitudes of the local tribes had already begun to shift in early 2005. 'This shift in the strategic calculus of the tribes made a successful US-Iraqi tribal strategy possible', Austin Long wrote in *Survival* in 2008.⁵

Scholars and analysts have singled out a number of triggers for the Awakening: al-Qaeda's excessive use of brutality and violence, such as the

killing of Sheikh Sattar Abdul Abu Risha's family; tribal loyalties and al-Qaeda's marriage policies;⁶ the battle of Falluja in November 2004;⁷ the Iraqi elections in January 2005; Sunni sheikhs' concerns about loss of power and sources of revenue to the foreign intruders; or a combination of these.⁸ What is not controversial, however, is that the Anbar Awakening started before the surge and was caused to a significant extent by the tactical blunders of al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia. The conditions for one of the most important operational developments of the Iraq War were rooted in complex tribal relations and local history, not principally in general counter-insurgency doctrine and practice, although US forces did subsequently facilitate the spread of the movement.

The situation Rotmann, Tohn and Wharton describe might be an historical exception rather than the rule. In war, both politics and the enemy have a vote, and both might limit the military's room for manoeuvre in a way that makes it much more difficult to implement boilerplate counter-insurgency lessons.

Although the US military is now widely considered well prepared for counter-insurgency operations, Rotmann, Tohn and Wharton write, 'whether or not it can succeed in practice will be seen in Afghanistan'. But applying Iraqi lessons to Afghanistan is a fraught approach for at least three reasons.

Firstly, the mission is fundamentally different. The objective in Iraq always has been more limited than the goal in Afghanistan. When Iraq was at the brink of civil war in 2006, the goal was to pull the country back from the abyss and to restore the status quo ante — stability and security — albeit with a new and preferably democratic government. In Afghanistan, the goal has always been more ambitious: 'to defeat, disrupt, and destroy' al-Qaeda, in Obama's words, and to prevent Afghanistan from again becoming a 'safe-haven' for terrorists. The goal, in other words, is to overcome the status quo ante, not to restore it.

Secondly, the adversary is different. The main enemy, al-Qaeda, has morphed from a hierarchical organisation into a vague entity that is more difficult to describe. Experts vehemently disagree on whether jihad in the twenty-first century is still managed by a central cadre of leaders.⁹ It is highly questionable that Salafism can be 'defeated' or 'destroyed' in Afghanistan

and Pakistan. In Iraq, the relationship between counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency was less jumbled and twisted than it is in Afghanistan, both tactically and strategically. How, precisely, countering the Afghan insurgency, even if successful, will counter and disrupt global terrorism remains an open question.

Finally, conditions for success are difficult to replicate across ISAF. A remarkable coincidence brought about the rise of counter-insurgency in the US military at a moment of immense stress and strain. It is highly unlikely that history will repeat itself for America's allies in Afghanistan and beyond. NATO's European land forces and their operations in Afghanistan lack a number of essential ingredients: most European armies do not have the same cadre of strong-willed and Iraq-tested junior officers in combination with senior dissidents, but they also lack two further elements: the political clout in domestic capitals and the same degree of doctrinal and operational freedom. And in Afghanistan NATO does not benefit from an equally inept enemy; the various Taliban sub-groups (increasingly in coalition with hardened mujahadeen fighters, their former enemies¹⁰) seem more capable than al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia and certainly much older and better established in the complex patchwork of Afghanistan's local cultures.

The US land forces might be 'knowledge-based' organisations that 'learn under fire', albeit within limits. But organisational self-examination has limited utility in grappling with multinational counter-insurgency in Afghanistan and global counter-terrorism beyond.

Notes

- 1 Thomas Ricks, *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006–2008* (London: Penguin, 2009).
- 2 See George Packer, 'The Last Mission,' *The New Yorker*, 26 September 2009, pp. 38–55.
- 3 Bruce Ackerman, 'A General's Public Pressure', *Washington Post*, 3 October 2009.
- 4 Various discussions on background with US participants at a major counter-insurgency conference, 'Irregular War', US Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island, 15–16 September 2009.
- 5 Austin Long, 'The Anbar Awakening', *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, vol. 50, no. 2, April–May 2008, p. 78.

- ⁶ See David Kilcullen's description at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2007/08/anatomy-of-a-tribal-revolt/>.
- ⁷ Long, 'The Anbar Awakening', p. 77.
- ⁸ John A. McCary, 'The Anbar Awakening: An Alliance of Incentives', *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 1, January 2009, p. 44.
- ⁹ Bruce Hoffman, 'The Myth of Grass-Roots Terrorism: Why Osama bin Laden Still Matters', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 87, no. 3, May–June 2008, pp. 133–8; Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Marc Sageman and Bruce Hoffman, 'Does Osama Still Call the Shots? Debating the Containment of al-Qaeda's Leadership', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 87, no. 4, July–August, 2008, pp. 163–7.
- ¹⁰ Thomas Ruttig, 'The Other Side', Afghanistan Analysts Network Thematic Report no. 1, July 2009, http://www.aan-afghanistan.org/uploads/200907/AAN_Report_Ruttig_-_The_Other_Side.pdf.

Response

Philipp Rotmann, David Tohn and Jaron Wharton

Gian Gentile and Thomas Rid address a number of salient issues. Gentile's warning is well taken: nothing is won if the military ends up replacing the combined-arms hammer, to which every problem looks like a nail, with a counter-insurgency screwdriver to which every problem looks like the right kind of screw. The adoption of population-centric counter-insurgency in Iraq did, as Rid points out, allow the US military to exploit the opportunity provided by the Anbar Awakening, which should make it a welcome addition to the doctrinal toolkit, and one that was notably absent before. Whether

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that tool is appropriate for the situation in Afghanistan today, the major policy question lurking behind several of the points raised by Gentile and Rid, is a different question. At the same time, Gentile's question as to how a military develops and maintains the ability to do operational-level planning is valid. We know what the operational level looks like in a conventional war; do we know what it looks like in a counter-insurgency environment? This is a legitimate question that the military intelligentsia ought to explore.

Since a counter-insurgency strategy has been adopted in Afghanistan, Rid raises another important strategic issue: will our allies be able to similarly adapt while in contact with a resourceful and persistent enemy, especially given their respective political and social constraints? This is a crucial question, since the coalition in Afghanistan must sustain a level of operational homogeneity for the current strategy to have a chance of success. It is necessary to understand that nations will likely come to the fight with caveats, to welcome their contributions and to move on. Barring a fundamental retooling, coalition partners need to tackle missions closely suited to their current strengths for them to be operationally relevant and effective. But, as Winston Churchill put it, 'there is at least one thing worse than fighting with allies – and that is to fight without them'.¹

Gentile's concerns about the inherent risks to core warfighting competencies at the expense of the strategic theory *du jour* are certainly warranted, especially in a resource-constrained environment. These comments reflect the healthy scepticism within professional military thinking about sacrificing core conventional warfighting skills for a 'boutique' capability and represent real concerns about what the next war will look like and how long it would take to rebuild those skills. The military does need to maintain its core competencies, but training equally along the full spectrum of warfare is difficult given the strain of current operations. However, as long as the US military remains engaged in a counter-insurgency war, such training will remain necessary, along with creative ways of limiting the trade-offs as much as possible.

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The argument that mastering conventional combined arms is all that is necessary for success echoes the flawed arguments of the 1990s that counter-insurgency (like nation building, peacekeeping or stability operations) is a secondary skill set automatically covered by an army that mastered the core, 'hard' things. The persistence of this argument is interesting, given that nearly every US military operation since *Desert Storm* in 1991 has marked a move away from pure combined-arms operations to something else, and that the rise of the insurgency in Iraq owes at least partly to the inadequacy of the US-led coalition's military occupation. Of course, the discipline, leadership and enabling equipment and organisation developed and honed in preparing for combined-arms operations are the same core characteristics and abilities that enabled successes later, but these are part of the army's core institutional culture that enables change.

Many of Gentile's and Rid's comments focus on the relevancy and effectiveness of the specific counter-insurgency strategy rather than the main thesis about learning and dissent. Most troubling is Gentile's assertion that learning and adaptive leadership are inextricably linked to the specific strategy of counter-insurgency, with all the associated risks, real and imagined. By extension, one could conclude that a learning and adaptive leadership cadre is contrary to good old-fashioned combined-arms fighting – 'nation building at the barrel of American guns'.

Military leaders such as David Petraeus, Stanley McChrystal and Raymond Odierno have emerged as a cadre of adaptive leaders who acknowledge that all things good do not happen solely through the application of combined-arms warfare. For example, McChrystal's July 2009 tactical directive limits the application of combined-arms warfare in order to fundamentally change the operational culture in which the military has operated in Afghanistan. This has led to a marked decrease in civilian casualties, recognising the Afghan people as the centre of gravity. The adaptive junior cadre, many of them veterans of the Iraq conflict, understand this and are responding accordingly. We heartily agree with Gentile that 'any military engaged in combat must, of course, learn and adapt; only a fool would argue otherwise'.

Our essay in *Survival* was a critical view on *how* the military changed since 11 September 2001, not an assessment of the ultimate efficacy of the

chosen strategic solution, population-centric counter-insurgency, operationally and tactically implemented following Army and Marine Corps Field Manual 3-24. Whether that solution was the best or only option available in Iraq, or in Afghanistan today, is an open question. Rather, we detailed what we believe was a success story of innovation, mainly on the tactical and operational levels, by a historically rigid institution – but an institution that already had some established mechanisms to embrace internal criticism. The catalysts for change were both bottom-up (necessary but insufficient) and top-down (sufficient but ultimately driven by necessity). The bottom-up component provided an indispensable source of ideas, experimental innovation and pressure for change, a body of experience that informed senior leaders to make fundamental changes in how the army trains, equips and fights. But it was the top down that locked this change in.

This was not the case just a generation ago. Then Andrew Krepinevich was scorned for his assertion that ‘the Army (after Vietnam) ended up trying to fight the kind of conventional war that it was trained, organized, and prepared for (and that it wanted to fight) instead of the [counter-insurgency] war that it was sent to fight’.³ He was actually banned by the superintendent of West Point from speaking at the academy.¹ In contrast, today you can (as the army’s Training and Doctrine Command recently announced) edit selected manuals ‘wiki-style’ or collaboratively. The Supreme Allied Commander Europe, Admiral James Stavridis, welcomes Facebook friends, and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, recently announced a YouTube channel. This, of course, raises the question of how much ‘free speech’ is too much, but it also engages *all* of the military’s intellectual capital to seriously address fundamental challenges. And, for the long term, it reinforces the cultural imperative that change will always be necessary and that every leader has a stake and a role in achieving it. The United States military, as an institution, may not be afforded the luxury of several years under fire to enact change in the future.

Notes

- ¹ P.G. Tsouras, *The Dictionary of Military Quotations* (London: Greenhill Books, 2005), p. 30.
- ² David Cloud and Greg Jaffe, *The Fourth Star* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2009), pp. 62–4.
- ³ Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 271.