

Twenty-Eight Articles

Fundamentals of Company-level Counterinsurgency

by

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This paper reflects the author's personal judgments and does not represent the views of any department or agency of the U.S. Government or any other government.

Introduction

Your company has just been warned for deployment on counterinsurgency operations in Iraq or Afghanistan. You have read David Galula, T.E. Lawrence and Robert Thompson. You have studied FM 3-24 and now understand the history, philosophy and theory of counterinsurgency. You watched *Black Hawk Down* and *The Battle of Algiers*, and you know this will be the most difficult challenge of your life.

But what does all the theory mean, at the company level? How do the principles translate into action – at night, with the GPS down, the media criticizing you, the locals complaining in a language you don't understand, and an unseen enemy killing your people by ones and twos? How does counterinsurgency actually happen?

There are no universal answers, and insurgents are among the most adaptive opponents you will ever face. Countering them will demand every ounce of your intellect. But be comforted: you are not the first to feel this way. There are tactical fundamentals you can apply, to link the theory with the techniques and procedures you already know.

What is counterinsurgency?

If you have not studied counterinsurgency theory, here it is in a nutshell: this is a competition with the insurgent for the right and the ability to win the hearts, minds and acquiescence of the population. You are being sent in because the insurgents, at their strongest, can defeat anything weaker than you. But you have more combat power than you can or should use in most situations. Injudicious use of firepower creates blood feuds, homeless people and societal disruption that fuels and perpetuates the insurgency. The most beneficial actions are often local politics, civic action, and beat-cop behaviors. For your side to win, the people do not have to like you but they must respect you, accept that your actions benefit them, and trust your integrity and ability to deliver on promises, particularly regarding their security. In this battlefield popular perceptions and rumor are more influential than the facts and more powerful than a hundred tanks.

Within this context, what follows are observations from collective experience: the distilled essence of what those who went before you learned. They are expressed as commandments, for clarity – but are really more like folklore. Apply them judiciously and skeptically.

Preparation

Time is short during pre-deployment, but you will never have more time to think than you have now. Now is your chance to prepare yourself and your command.

1. **Know your turf.** Know the people, the topography, economy, history, religion and culture. Know every village, road, field, population group, tribal leader and ancient grievance. Your task is to become the world expert on your district. If you don't know precisely where you will be operating, study the general area. Read the map like a book: study it every night before sleep, and re-draw it from memory every morning, until you understand its patterns intuitively. Develop a mental model of your area – a framework in which to fit every new piece of knowledge you acquire. Study handover notes from predecessors; better still, get in touch with the unit in theater and pick their brains. In an ideal world, intelligence officers and area experts would brief you. This rarely happens: and even if it does, there is no substitute for personal mastery. Understand the broader “area of influence” – this can be a wide area, particularly when insurgents draw on “global” grievances. Share out aspects of the operational area among platoon leaders and non-commissioned officers: have each individual develop a personal specialization and brief the others. Neglect this knowledge, and it will kill you.
2. **Diagnose the problem.** Once you know your area and its people, you can begin to diagnose the problem. Who are the insurgents? What drives them? What makes local leaders tick? Counterinsurgency is fundamentally a competition between many groups, each seeking to mobilize the population in support of their agenda – counterinsurgency is always more than two-sided. So you must understand what motivates the people and how to mobilize them. You need to know why and how the insurgents are getting followers. This means you need to know your real enemy, not a cardboard cut-out. The enemy is adaptive, resourceful and probably grew up in the region where you will operate. The locals have known him since he was a boy – how long have they known you? Your worst opponent is not the psychopathic terrorist of Hollywood, it is the charismatic follow-me warrior who would make your best platoon leader. His followers are not misled or naïve: much of his success is due to bad government policies or security forces that alienate the population. Work this problem collectively with your platoon and squad leaders. Discuss ideas, explore the problem, understand what you are facing, and seek a consensus. If this sounds un-military, get over it. Once you are in theater, situations will arise too quickly for orders, or even commander's intent. Corporals and privates will have to make snap judgments with strategic impact. The only way to help them is to give them a shared understanding, then trust them to think for themselves on the day.
3. **Organize for intelligence.** In counterinsurgency, killing the enemy is easy. Finding him is often nearly impossible. Intelligence and operations are complementary. Your operations will be intelligence driven, but intelligence will come mostly from your own operations, not as a “product” prepared and served up by higher headquarters. So you must organize for intelligence. You will need a company S2 and intelligence section – including analysts. You may need platoon S2s and S3s, and you will need a reconnaissance and surveillance element. You will not have enough linguists – you never do – but consider carefully where best to employ them. Linguists are a battle-winning asset: but like any other scarce resource you must have a prioritized “bump plan” in case you lose them. Often during pre-deployment the best use of linguists is to train your command in basic language. You will probably not get augmentation for all this: but you

must still do it. Put the smartest soldiers in the S2 section and the R&S squad. You will have one less rifle squad: but the intelligence section will pay for itself in lives and effort saved.

4. **Organize for inter-agency operations.** Almost everything in counterinsurgency is inter-agency. And everything important – from policing to intelligence to civil-military operations to trash collection – will involve your company working with civilian actors and local indigenous partners you cannot control, but whose success is essential for yours. Train the company in inter-agency operations – get a briefing from the State Department, aid agencies and the local Police or Fire Brigade. Train point-men in each squad to deal with the inter-agency. Realize that civilians find rifles, helmets and body armor intimidating. Learn how not to scare them. Ask others who come from that country or culture about your ideas. See it through the eyes of a civilian who knows nothing about the military. How would you react if foreigners came to your neighborhood and conducted the operations you planned? What if somebody came to your mother’s house and did that? Most importantly, know that your operations will create temporary breathing space, but long-term development and stabilization by civilian agencies will ultimately win the war.
5. **Travel light and harden your CSS.** You will be weighed down with body armor, rations, extra ammunition, communications gear, and a thousand other things. The enemy will carry a rifle or RPG, a *shemagh* and a water bottle if he is lucky. Unless you ruthlessly lighten your load and enforce a culture of speed and mobility, the insurgents will consistently out-run and out-maneuver you. But in lightening your load, make sure you can always “reach back” to call for firepower or heavy support if needed. Also, remember to harden your CSS. The enemy will attack your weakest points. Most attacks on coalition forces in Iraq in 2004 and 2005, outside pre-planned combat actions like the two battles of Fallujah or Operation Iron Horse, were against CSS installations and convoys. You do the math. Ensure your CSS assets are hardened, have communications, and are trained in combat operations. They may do more fighting than your rifle squads.
6. **Find a political/cultural adviser.** In a force optimized for counterinsurgency, you might receive a political/cultural adviser at company level: a diplomat or military foreign area officer, able to speak the language and navigate the intricacies of local politics. Back on planet Earth, the Corps and Division commander will get a POLAD: you will not, so you must improvise. Find a political/cultural adviser from among your people – perhaps an officer, perhaps not (see article 8). Someone with people skills and a “feel” for the environment will do better than a political science graduate. Don’t try to be your own cultural adviser: you must be fully aware of the political and cultural dimension, but this is a different task. Also, don’t give one of your intelligence people this role. They can help, but their task is to understand the environment – the political adviser’s job is to help shape it.
7. **Train the squad leaders – then trust them.** Counterinsurgency is a squad and platoon leader’s war, and often a private soldier’s war. Battles are won or lost in moments: whoever can bring combat power to bear in seconds, on a street corner, will win. The commander on the spot controls the fight. You must train the squad leaders to act intelligently and independently without orders. If your squad leaders are competent, you can get away with average company or platoon staffs. The reverse is not the case. Training should focus on basic skills: marksmanship, patrolling, security on the move and

at the halt, basic drills. When in doubt, spend less time on company and platoon training, and more time on squads. Ruthlessly replace leaders who do not make the grade. But once people are trained, and you have a shared operational “diagnosis”, you must trust them. We talk about this, but few company or platoon leaders really trust their people. In counterinsurgency, you have no choice.

8. **Rank is nothing: talent is everything.** Not everyone is good at counterinsurgency. Many people don’t understand the concept, and some who do can’t execute it. It is difficult, and in a conventional force only a few people will master it. Anyone can learn the basics, but a few “naturals” do exist. Learn how to spot these people and put them into positions where they can make a difference. Rank matters far less than talent – a few good men under a smart junior non-commissioned officer can succeed in counterinsurgency, where hundreds of well-armed soldiers under a mediocre senior officer will fail.
9. **Have a game plan.** The final preparation task is to develop a game plan: a mental picture of how you see the operation developing. You will be tempted to try and do this too early. But wait: as your knowledge improves, you will get a better idea of what needs to be done, and of your own limitations. Like any plan, this plan will change once you hit the ground, and may need to be scrapped if there is a major shift in the environment. But you still need a plan, and the process of planning will give you a simple robust idea of what to achieve, even if the methods change. This is sometimes called “operational design”. One approach is to identify basic stages in your operation: e.g. “establish dominance, build local networks, marginalize the enemy”. Make sure you can easily transition between phases, both forward and backward in case of setbacks. Just as the insurgent can adapt his activity to yours, you must have a simple enough plan to survive setbacks without collapsing. This plan is the “solution” that matches the shared “diagnosis” you developed earlier – it must be simple, and known to everyone.

The Golden Hour

You have deployed, completed reception and staging, and (if you are lucky) attended the in-country counterinsurgency school. Now it is time to enter your sector and start your tour.

This is the golden hour. Mistakes made now will haunt you for the rest of the tour, while early successes will set the tone for victory. You will look back on your early actions and cringe at your clumsiness. So be it: but you must act.

10. **Be there.** The first rule of deployment in counterinsurgency is to be there. You can almost never outrun the enemy. If you are not present when an incident happens, there is usually little you can do about it. So your first order of business is to establish presence. If you cannot do this throughout your sector, then do it wherever you can. This demands a residential approach – living in your sector, in close proximity to the population, rather than raiding into the area from remote, secure bases. Movement on foot, sleeping in local villages, night patrolling: all these seem more dangerous than they are. They establish links with the locals, who see you as real people they can trust and do business with, not as aliens who descend from an armored box. Driving around in an armored convoy – day-tripping like a tourist in hell – degrades situational awareness, makes you a target and is ultimately more dangerous.

11. **Avoid knee jerk responses to first impressions.** Don't act rashly, get the facts first. The violence you see may be part of the insurgent strategy, it may be various interest groups fighting it out, or it may be people settling personal vendettas. Or, it may just be daily life: "normality" in Kandahar is not the same as in Kansas. So you need time to learn what normality looks like. The insurgent commander also wants to goad you into lashing out at the population or making a mistake. Unless you happen to be on the spot when an incident occurs, you will have only second-hand reports and may misunderstand the local context or interpretation. This fragmentation and "disaggregation" of the battlefield – particularly in urban areas – means that first impressions are often highly misleading. Of course, you cannot avoid making judgments. But if possible, check them with an older hand or a trusted local. If you can, keep one or two officers from your predecessor unit for the first part of the tour. Try to avoid a rush to judgment.
12. **Prepare for handover from Day One.** Believe it or not, you will not resolve the insurgency on your watch. Your tour will end, and your successors will need your corporate knowledge. Start handover folders, in every platoon and specialist squad, from day one – ideally, you would have inherited these from your predecessors, but if not you must start them. The folders should include lessons learned, details about the population, village and patrol reports, updated maps, photographs – anything that will help newcomers master the environment. Computerized databases are fine, but keep good back-ups and ensure you have hard copy of key artifacts and documents. This is boring, tedious and essential. Over time, you will create a corporate memory that keeps your people alive.
13. **Build trusted networks.** Once you have settled into your sector, your next task is to build trusted networks. This is the true meaning of the phrase "hearts and minds", which comprises two separate components. "Hearts" means persuading people their best interests are served by your success; "Minds" means convincing them that you can protect them, and that resisting you is pointless. Note that neither concept has to do with whether people like you. Calculated self-interest, not emotion, is what counts. Over time, if you successfully build networks of trust, these will grow like roots into the population, displacing the enemy's networks, bringing him out into the open to fight you, and seizing the initiative. These networks include local allies, community leaders, local security forces, NGOs and other friendly or neutral non-state actors in your area, and the media. Conduct village and neighborhood surveys to identify needs in the community – then follow through to meet them, build common interests and mobilize popular support. This is your true main effort: everything else is secondary. Actions that help build trusted networks serve your cause. Actions – even killing high-profile targets – that undermine trust or disrupt your networks help the enemy.
14. **Start easy.** If you were trained in maneuver warfare you know about surfaces and gaps. This applies to counterinsurgency as much as any other form of maneuver. Don't try to crack the hardest nut first – don't go straight for the main insurgent stronghold, try to provoke a decisive showdown, or focus efforts on villages that support the insurgents. Instead, start from secure areas and work gradually outwards. Do this by extending your influence through the locals' own networks. Go with, not against, the grain of local society: first win the confidence of a few villages, and then see who they trade, intermarry or do business with. Now win these people over. Soon enough the showdown with the insurgents will come. But now you have local allies, a mobilized population and

a trusted network at your back. Do it the other way round and no one will mourn your failure.

15. **Seek early victories.** In this early phase, your aim is to stamp your dominance in your sector. Do this by seeking an early victory. This will probably not translate into a combat victory over the enemy: looking for such a victory can be overly aggressive and create collateral damage – especially since you really do not yet understand your sector. Also, such a combat victory depends on the enemy being stupid enough to present you with a clear-cut target, a rare windfall in counterinsurgency. Instead, you may achieve a victory by resolving long-standing issues your predecessors have failed to address, or co-opting a key local leader who has resisted cooperation with our forces. Like any other form of armed propaganda, achieving even a small victory early in the tour sets the tone for what comes later, and helps seize the initiative – which you have probably lost due to the inevitable hiatus entailed by the handover-takeover with your predecessor.
16. **Practise deterrent patrolling.** Establish patrolling methods that deter the enemy from attacking you. Often our patrolling approach seems designed to provoke, then defeat, enemy attacks. This is counter-productive: it leads to a raiding, day-tripping mindset or, worse, a bunker mentality. Instead, practise deterrent patrolling. There are many methods for this, including “multiple” patrolling where you flood an area with numerous small patrols working together. Each is too small to be a worthwhile target, and the insurgents never know where all the patrols are – making an attack on any one patrol extremely risky. Other methods include so-called “blue-green” patrolling, where you mount daylight overt humanitarian patrols, which go covert at night and hunt specific targets. Again, the aim is to keep the enemy off balance, and the population reassured, through constant and unpredictable activity – which, over time, deters attacks and creates a more permissive environment. A reasonable rule of thumb is that one to two thirds of your force should be on patrol at any time, day or night.
17. **Be prepared for setbacks.** Setbacks are normal in counterinsurgency, as in every other form of war. You will make mistakes, lose people, or occasionally kill or detain the wrong person. You may fail in building or expanding networks. If this happens, don’t lose heart. Simply drop back to the previous phase of your game plan and recover your balance. It is normal in company counterinsurgency operations for some platoons to be doing well, while others do badly. This is not necessarily evidence of failure. Give local commanders the freedom to adjust their posture to local conditions. This creates elasticity that helps you survive setbacks.
18. **Remember the global audience.** One of the biggest differences between the counterinsurgencies our fathers fought and those we face today is the omnipresence of globalized media. Most houses in Iraq have one or more satellite dishes. Web bloggers, print, radio and television reporters and others are monitoring and commenting on your every move. When the insurgents ambush your patrols or set off a car bomb, they do so not to destroy one more track, but because they want graphic images of a burning vehicle and dead bodies for the evening news. Beware the “scripted enemy”, who plays to a global audience and seeks to defeat you in the court of global public opinion. You counter this by training people to always bear in mind the global audience, assume that everything they say or do will be publicized, and befriend the media. Get the press on-side: help them get their story, and trade information with them. Good relationships with

non-embedded media – especially indigenous media – dramatically increase your situational awareness, and help get your message across to the global and local audience.

19. **Engage the women, beware the children.** Most insurgent fighters are men. But in traditional societies, women are hugely influential in forming the social networks that insurgents use for support. Co-opting neutral or friendly women, through targeted social and economic programs, builds networks of enlightened self-interest that eventually undermine the insurgents. You need your own female counterinsurgents, including inter-agency people, to do this effectively. Win the women, and you own the family unit. Own the family, and you take a big step forward in mobilizing the population. Conversely, though, stop your people fraternizing with local children. Your troops are homesick; they want to drop their guard with the kids. But children are sharp-eyed, lacking in empathy, and willing to commit atrocities their elders would shrink from. The insurgents are watching: they will notice a growing friendship between one of your people and a local child, and either harm the child as punishment, or use them against you. Similarly, stop people throwing candies or presents to children. It attracts them to our vehicles, creates crowds the enemy can exploit, and leads to children being run over. Harden your heart and keep the children at arm's length.
20. **Take stock regularly.** You probably already know that a “body count” tells you little, because you usually cannot know how many insurgents there were to start with, how many moved into the area, transferred from supporter to combatant status or how many new fighters the conflict has created. But you still need to develop metrics early in the tour and refine them as the operation progresses. They should cover a range of social, informational, military and economic issues. Use metrics intelligently to form an overall impression of progress – not in a mechanistic “traffic light” fashion. Typical metrics include: percentage of engagements initiated by our forces versus those initiated by insurgents; longevity of friendly local leaders in positions of authority; number and quality of tip-offs on insurgent activity that originate spontaneously from the population; economic activity at markets and shops. These mean virtually nothing as a snapshot – trends over time are the true indicators of progress in your sector.

Groundhog Day

Now you are in “steady state”. You are established in your sector, and people are settling into that “groundhog day” mentality that hits every unit at some stage during every tour. It will probably take people at least the first third of the tour to become effective in the environment, if not longer. Then in the last period you will struggle against the short-timer mentality. So this middle part of the tour is the most productive – but keeping the flame alive, and bringing the local population along with you, takes immense leadership.

21. **Exploit a “single narrative”.** Since counterinsurgency is a competition to mobilize popular support, it pays to know how people are mobilized. In most societies there are opinion-makers: local leaders, pillars of the community, religious figures, media personalities, and others who set trends and influence public perceptions. This influence – including the pernicious influence of the insurgents – often takes the form of a “single narrative”: a simple, unifying, easily-expressed story or explanation that organizes people's experience and provides a framework for understanding events. Nationalist and ethnic historical myths, or sectarian creeds, provide such a narrative. The Iraqi insurgents have one, as do al-Qa'ida and the Taliban. To undercut their influence you must exploit

an alternative narrative: or better yet, tap into an existing narrative that excludes the insurgents. This narrative is often worked out for you by higher headquarters – but only you have the detailed knowledge to tailor the narrative to local conditions and generate leverage from it. For example, you might use a nationalist narrative to marginalize foreign fighters in your area, or a narrative of national redemption to undermine former regime elements that have been terrorizing the population. At the company level, you do this in baby steps, by getting to know local opinion-makers, winning their trust, learning what motivates them and building on this to find a single narrative that emphasizes the inevitability and rightness of your ultimate success. This is art, not science.

22. **Local forces should mirror the enemy, not ourselves.** By this stage, you will be working closely with local forces, training or supporting them, and building indigenous capability. The natural tendency is to build forces in our own image, with the aim of eventually handing our role over to them. This is a mistake. Instead, local indigenous forces need to mirror the enemy’s capabilities, and seek to supplant the insurgent’s role. This does not mean they should be “irregular” in the sense of being brutal, or outside proper control. Rather, they should move, equip and organize like the insurgents – but have access to your support and be under the firm control of their parent societies. Combined with a mobilized population and trusted networks, this allows local forces to “hard-wire” the enemy out of the environment, under top-cover from you. At the company level, this means that raising, training and employing local indigenous auxiliary forces (police and military) are valid tasks. This requires high-level clearance, of course, but if support is given, you should establish a company training cell. Platoons should aim to train one local squad, then use that squad as a nucleus for a partner platoon, and company headquarters should train an indigenous leadership team. This mirrors the “growth” process of other trusted networks, and tends to emerge naturally as you win local allies – who want to take up arms in their own defense.
23. **Practise armed civil affairs.** Counterinsurgency is armed social work; an attempt to redress basic social and political problems while being shot at. This makes civil affairs a central counterinsurgency activity, not an afterthought. It is how you restructure the environment to displace the enemy from it. In your company sector, civil affairs must focus on meeting basic needs first, then progress up Maslow’s hierarchy as each successive need is met. A series of village or neighborhood surveys, regularly updated, are an invaluable tool to help understand the populations’ needs, and track progress in meeting them over time. You need intimate cooperation with inter-agency partners here – national, international and local. You will not be able to control these partners – many NGOs, for example, do not want to be too closely associated with you because they need to preserve their perceived neutrality. Instead, you need to work on a shared diagnosis of the problem, building a consensus that helps you self-synchronize. Your role is to provide protection, identify needs, facilitate civil affairs and use improvements in social conditions as leverage to build networks and mobilize the population. Thus, there is no such thing as impartial humanitarian assistance or civil affairs in counterinsurgency. Every time you help someone, you hurt someone else – not least the insurgents. So civil and humanitarian assistance personnel will be targeted. Protecting them is a matter not only of close-in defense, but also of creating a permissive operating environment by co-opting the beneficiaries of aid – local communities and leaders – to help you help them.

24. **Small is beautiful.** Another natural tendency is to go for large-scale, mass programs. In particular, we have a tendency to template ideas that succeed in one area and transplant them into another, and we tend to take small programs that work and try to replicate them on a larger scale. Again, this is usually a mistake – often programs succeed because of specific local conditions of which we are unaware, or because their very smallness kept them below the enemy’s radar and helped them flourish unmolested. At the company level, programs that succeed in one district often also succeed in another (because the overall company sector is small), but small-scale projects rarely proceed smoothly into large programs. Keep programs small: this makes them cheap, sustainable, low-key and (importantly) recoverable if they fail. You can add new programs – also small, cheap and tailored to local conditions – as the situation allows.
25. **Fight the enemy’s strategy, not his forces.** At this stage, if things are proceeding well, the insurgents will go over to the offensive. Yes, the *offensive* – because you have created a situation so dangerous to the insurgents, by threatening to displace them from the environment, that they have to attack you and the population to get back into the game. Thus it is normal, even in the most successful operations, to have spikes of offensive insurgent activity late in the campaign. This does not necessarily mean you have done something wrong (though it may: it depends on whether you have successfully mobilized the population). At this point the tendency is to go for the jugular and seek to destroy the enemy’s forces in open battle. This is rarely the best choice at company level, because provoking major combat usually plays into the enemy’s hands by undermining the population’s confidence. Instead, attack the enemy’s strategy: if he is seeking to recapture the allegiance of a segment of the local population, then co-opt them against him. If he is trying to provoke a sectarian conflict, go over to “peace enforcement mode”. The permutations are endless but the principle is the same – fight the enemy’s strategy, not his forces.
26. **Build your own solution – only attack the enemy when he gets in the way.** Try not to be distracted, or forced into a series of reactive moves, by a desire to kill or capture the insurgents. Your aim should be to implement your own solution – the “game plan” you developed early in the campaign, and then refined through interaction with local partners. Your approach must be environment-centric (based on dominating the whole district and implementing a solution to its systemic problems) rather than enemy-centric. This means that, particularly late in the campaign, you may need to learn to negotiate with the enemy. Members of the population that supports you also know the enemy’s leaders – they may have grown up together in the small district that is now your company sector – and valid negotiating partners sometimes emerge as the campaign progresses. Again, you need close inter-agency relationships to exploit opportunities to coopt segments of the enemy. This helps you wind down the insurgency without alienating potential local allies who have relatives or friends in the insurgent movement. At this stage, a defection is better than a surrender, a surrender is better than a capture, and a capture is better than a kill.

Getting Short

Time is short, and the tour is drawing to a close. The key problem now is keeping your people focused, preventing them from dropping their guard and maintaining the rage on all the multifarious programs, projects and operations that you have started. In this final phase, the previous articles still stand, but there is an important new one:

27. **Keep your extraction plan secret.** The temptation to talk about home becomes almost unbearable toward the end of a tour. The locals know you are leaving, and probably have a better idea than you of the generic extraction plan – remember, they have seen units come and go. But you must protect the specific details of the extraction plan, or the enemy will use this as an opportunity to score a high-profile hit, re-capture the population’s allegiance by scare tactics that convince them they will not be protected once you leave, or persuade them that your successor unit will be oppressive or incompetent. Keep the details secret, within a tightly controlled compartment in your headquarters. And resist the temptation to say goodbye to local allies: you can always send a postcard from home.

Four “What Ifs”

The articles above describe what *should* happen, but we all know that things go wrong. Here are some “what ifs” to consider:

What if you get moved to a different area? You prepared for ar-Ramadi and studied Dulaim tribal structures and Sunni beliefs. Now you are going to Najaf and will be surrounded by al-Hassan and Unizzah tribes and Shi’a communities. But that work was not wasted. In mastering your first area, you learned techniques you can apply: how to “case” an operational area, how to decide what matters in the local societal structure. Do the same again – and this time the process is easier and faster, since you have an existing mental structure, and can focus on what is different. The same applies if you get moved frequently within a battalion or brigade area.

What if higher headquarters doesn’t “get” counterinsurgency? Higher headquarters is telling you the mission is to “kill terrorist”, or pushing for high-speed armored patrols and a base-camp mentality. They just do not seem to understand counterinsurgency. This is not uncommon, since company-grade officers today often have more combat experience than senior officers. In this case, just do what you can. Try not to create expectations that higher headquarters will not let you meet. Apply the adage “first do no harm”. Over time, you will find ways to do what you have to do. But never lie to higher headquarters about your locations or activities: they own the indirect fires.

What if you have no resources? Yours is a low-priority sector: you have no linguists, the aid agencies have no money for projects in your area, you have a low priority for funding. You can still get things done, but you need to focus on self-reliance, keep things small and sustainable, and ruthlessly prioritize effort. Local community leaders are your allies in this: they know what matters to them more than you do. Be honest with them, discuss possible projects and options with community leaders, get them to choose what their priority is. Often they will find the translators, building supplies or expertise that you need, and will only expect your support and protection in making their projects work. And the process of negotiation and consultation will help mobilize their support, and strengthen their social cohesion. If you set your sights on what is achievable, the situation can still work.

What if the theater situation shifts under your feet? It is your worst nightmare: everything has gone well in your sector, but the whole theater situation has changed and invalidates your efforts. Think of the first battle of Fallujah, the al-Askariya shrine bombing, or the Sadr uprising. What do you do? Here is where having a flexible, adaptive game plan comes in. Just as the insurgents drop down to a lower posture when things go wrong, now is the time to drop back a stage, consolidate, regain your balance and prepare to expand again when the situation

allows. But see article 28: if you cede the initiative, you must regain it as soon as the situation allows, or you will eventually lose.

Conclusion

This, then, is the tribal wisdom, the folklore which those who went before you have learned. Like any folklore it needs interpretation, and contains seemingly contradictory advice. Over time, as you apply unremitting intellectual effort to study your sector, you will learn to apply these ideas in your own way, and will add to this store of wisdom from your own observations and experience. So only one article remains; and if you remember nothing else, remember this:

28. **Whatever else you do, keep the initiative.** In counterinsurgency, the initiative is everything. If the enemy is reacting to you, you control the environment. Provided you mobilize the population, you will win. If you are reacting to the enemy – even if you are killing or capturing him in large numbers – then he is controlling the environment and you will eventually lose. In counterinsurgency, the enemy initiates most attacks, targets you unexpectedly and withdraws too fast for you to react. Do not be drawn into purely reactive operations: focus on the population, build your own solution, further your game plan and fight the enemy only when he gets in the way. This gains and keeps the initiative.

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THE AUTHOR

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