

Know Thy Enemy: Intelligence in COIN Operations

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RYAN AHERIN, JUN 25 2012

"If it is accepted that the problem of defeating the enemy consists very largely of finding him, it is easy to recognize the paramount importance of good information." -Gen. Sir Frank Kitson[1]

On 1 May 2003 President George W. Bush announced the end of, "Major combat operations in Iraq,"[2] however the next few months would see a developing insurgency that would draw the US and coalition forces into another eight years of conflict. The American military experience in Iraq has underscored the difficulties that a large conventional force faces in transitioning from completing combat operations against another conventional force to dealing with a dynamic guerrilla insurgency. As Gen. Frank Kitson indicated in the quotation above, the key to defeating an insurgency lies in dominating the information battlefield rather than the supremacy of military might.

The experiences of the British in Northern Ireland and the successes and failures of American and Coalition forces in Iraq provide a strong basis for the argument that a successful counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy must be built upon the proper acquisition and analysis of intelligence against insurgent forces, and the strategic and effective application of force. According to Maguire, a successful intelligence campaign consists of three crucial steps: "effectively gathering information, accurately processing and analyzing the information, and devising effective countermeasures to thwart enemy operations in the shortest possible time."[3] In light of this, we will look at the delicate relationship between intelligence and the application of force in a counterinsurgency based on the experiences in Northern Ireland and Iraq.

According to Kitson, an insurgency is in its most vulnerable state when it first begins operations before gaining popular support.[4] A successful campaign will require two types of intelligence; political and military. Political intelligence includes the ability to judge the level of popular support for political parties and terrorist groups. This will help decision makers select agreements that are acceptable to political and military actors involved and gauge the public support for or against the counterinsurgency.[5] The military intelligence required for a COIN campaign includes the accurate identification of terrorists, timely information on their operations, and accurate intelligence on their objectives and strategy.[6] In most cases, the general public is not supportive of the violent methods used by insurgents, but if the public feels that the government is unable to protect it from violence it will be more reluctant to share information.[7] Both the British in Northern Ireland and the Americans in Iraq had the general support of the population during the beginning stages of the insurgencies, but it was their failure to identify and implement key elements of political and operational intelligence that led to the eventual deterioration of public support for their COIN campaigns.

Northern Ireland: a heavy handed approach

During the onset of the Troubles starting in 1969, British troops were brought in to stem an increase in violence between the Catholic and Protestant communities. The troops had been requested by leaders in the Catholic community due to the excessive measures taken by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). At the time the soldiers were greeted as liberators by the Catholic community; however, events that unfolded soon told a different story.[8] There was a violent split between the Official IRA and the Provisional IRA (PIRA) while the PIRA was gearing up for a resumption of military action. In response to two PIRA-backed violent confrontations in Belfast between June and early July of 1970, the Heath government in London took a hardline stance against what it thought was another

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colony in rebellion.[9]

The counterinsurgency policy enforced between the recurrence of violence and 1975 was one that lacked political direction, was repressive enough to alienate the working-class Catholics, but failed to defeat the PIRA.[10] In 1969, the RUC had been disbanded by the Wilson government along with its intelligence gathering unit known as "Special Branch."[11] The SAS, which had more experience applying productive methods of collecting intelligence, was deployed to deal with the declining political situation in Oman which was considered a higher priority.[12] The army was deployed to Northern Ireland with a directive from the Attorney General to act as "common law" constables with no viable intelligence branch to aid in countering the growing insurgency.[13]

The information gathering methods that the army resorted to consisted of intensive foot and armed patrols; cordon-and-search; and internment and interrogation. These methods were less than subtle and quickly had a negative effect on the Catholic working-class population. From 1972-1976 approximately 250,000 house searches were conducted by the army, uncovering 5,800 illegal weapons and 661,000 rounds of ammunition.[14] While the confiscation of illegal arms was touted a success, one could hardly assume that the some 250,000 disaffected households had a positive effect on public opinion. The intensive patrolling operations would give the PIRA plenty of opportunities to attack security forces.[15] These patrols would prove to be largely ineffective because insurgents would use scouts to look for approaching uniformed patrols and would escape, forcing the military to resort to widespread search, arrest and screening operations.[16] The mass internment without trial was accompanied by brutal interrogation techniques that were intended to quickly gain up-to-date background information on terrorist activities. The adoption of brutal sensory deprivation techniques led to pressure from the international community for Britain to cease "inhumane" treatment of detainees.[17] Such methods of interrogation often produced information of questionable validity. As Eveleigh stated, "A frightened man will often admit anything, even to crimes he cannot possibly have committed."[18] Due to the ineffectiveness of the aforementioned interrogation methods, the British eventually refined their methods to focus on turning detainees into informants.[19]

The election of Merlyn Rees as Northern Ireland Secretary in 1974 brought about a change of strategy. Rees scaled back the army's involvement and moved for a policy of criminalization and police primacy. This put the RUC back in the primary role of dealing with the PIRA while the army was to play a more supporting role.[20] The RUC was backed up by a menagerie of covert military operations, most notably the Military Reconnaissance Force (MRF) that had been devised by General Kitson.[21] The shift to criminalization meant that each incident was treated as a crime scene where evidence was to be collected for the hopes of eventually arresting and convicting terrorists.[22] While the new policy focusing on criminalization and the collection of intelligence was not successful in defeating the insurgency, it was effective at containing the violence.[23] Following the end of major operations in Oman, the SAS was officially deployed to Northern Ireland in 1976. Although they were not authorized to work in undercover operations, they were effective in training the HUMINT collection agencies 14 Int and the Force Research Unit (FRU). The SAS was also involved in conducting patrols and being used for snatch-and-grab operations to arrest or neutralize terrorists caught in the act.[24]

By the late 1970's the counterinsurgency had transformed into an orchestra of intelligence agencies whose inner workings were as complex and contradicting as the war in which they fought. There was an extensive surveillance network including the use of helicopters, the SAS conducted patrols and manned covert observation posts, as well as the use of bugging devices planted in targets' homes.[25] A popular method of planting listening and video devices in a suspect's home, known as the 'dodgy holiday', was to convince them that they had won an all-expenses paid vacation and send them somewhere nice and sunny while agents planted devices in the target's home.[26] Another major asset in the security forces' intelligence network was the use of agents and informants. Some sources suggest that covert operations contributed to at least 100 arrests and 40 kills against the PIRA network alone.[27] Agents placed within networks at various levels and terrorists who had been turned to informants provided crucial information on a group's background, command structure, and operations.[28]

By 1977 the army had collected significant amounts of information on PIRA members through interrogation and informants. This led the PIRA to restructure from a brigade based system to a network of segregated eight man cells called 'Active Service Units' in order to make it more difficult for the army's intelligence branch to infiltrate.[29]. While

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the new structure made it more difficult to infiltrate from the bottom up, the segregated nature of the cells necessitated a more permanent and controlling central command. Under this structure, an informant from within the central organization would be devastating.[30] In 1982 the security forces tried to capitalize on the evidence they had obtained through surveillance and informants in what was known as the supergrass trials. The supergrass trials were a wave of trials in which the security forces brought to court hundreds of terrorists using the informants as witnesses against suspected operatives.[31] Unfortunately, the trials were unable to result in any significant convictions. Most of the informants were discredited due to their criminal backgrounds and most trials either failed to gain a conviction or the conviction was later overturned.[32]

While the trials themselves were a failure, they had a significant effect on the terrorists. The terrorist organizations used the trials to run assassination campaigns against each other and caused violent feuds from within in order to snuff out any remaining informants. As a result, the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) was practically destroyed and the PIRA was significantly weakened.[33] There have been suggestions that out of frustration with the failures of the legal process, the SAS adapted a shoot-to-kill policy.[34] Records show that between 1976 and 1984 the SAS had killed a total of nine terrorists; however from 1985 to 1992 they had killed a total of twenty seven, an increase of 300 per cent.[35] Although these operations may have been carried out within a legal gray area, they were successful in gradually wearing down the PIRA.

Better Late than Never: US COIN in Iraq

Unlike the British experience in Northern Ireland, the American difficulties in Iraq didn't stem from from an initial lack of intelligence. Prior to the 2003 invasion the Bush administration had received a multitude of reports warning of the difficulties of reconstruction and winning the peace in a post-Saddam Iraq. Several of these reports warned that Iraq was a deeply fragmented society with a history of combining violence with politics and the immediate deployment of civil security forces capable of dealing with a vast array of internal tensions would be necessary to fill the security vacuum.[36][37] Zalmay Khalilzad, the National Security Council's expert on Iraq, estimated that a minimum force between 360,000 and 500,000 would be needed to stabilize the country post-invasion.[38] Instead the administration decided to go in with only 150,000 troops, less than half the number that had been recommended.[39] Further evidence that the administration failed to grasp the realities of post-Saddam Iraq was that the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) was modeling the reconstruction phase after the American experiences in post-war Germany and Japan.[40] The use of the post World War II reconstruction era as a model for reconstruction in Iraq underscores a common US preference to focus on strategies built around its conventional military advantages. More suitable historic models such as Algeria, Bosnia, Malaya, or Vietnam would have required policymakers to prepare the public for a longer military commitment.[41] Although the American public was generally supportive of the proposed invasion of Iraq, it would have been more difficult to sell a possible drawn out conflict in the year before an election. Regardless of the administration's post-contingency plans, or lack thereof, soon after the fall of Saddam's regime the security situation on the ground began to slip out of the military's control.

In the summer of 2003 just following the culmination of Major Combat Operations the military leadership mistook the emergence of well organized sectarian militias as nothing more than the final acts of desperation by the remaining Ba'athist resistance. Lt. General Sanchez, the Combined Joint Task Force-Seven (CJTF-7) commander, left the responsibility of dealing with the escalating violence to his divisional commanders.[42] The intelligence effort reflected this view that the outbursts of violence were insignificant. Most of the effort was focused on searching for WMDs and it would not be until November of 2003, when guerrilla attacks on US troops averaged 40 per day, that the intelligence mission shifted its focus to the insurgency.[43] Operating without strategic guidance from the top and a lack of valuable intelligence, the military's response to the growing insurgency was counter-productive in restoring security in the country. Security forces responded to the insurgents with air strikes, artillery fire, and mass detainment of suspected insurgents. This led to a high number of civilian casualties and the detention of innocent civilians. Furthermore, the tactics used to detain and question suspects were ineffective for producing quality intelligence.[44]

In the summer of 2004 Sanchez was replaced by Gen. Casey as the Commander of CJTF-7. The new strategy under Gen. Casey was to focus on accelerating the transition of giving the responsibility for securing Iraq over to the Iraqi security forces. The main problem with this strategy was that the Iraqi security forces were highly unprepared for the

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responsibility of maintaining order against the growing insurgency.[45] Had the Iraqi army been left mostly in tact after the removal of Saddam it may have been strong enough to handle the transition from American power. A report from the Army War College published prior to the invasion stated that apart from several elites and units functioning to protect the regime, the majority of the regular army was not loyal to Saddam. It further warned that dismantling the army would essentially mean the destruction of one of the only forces of unity in the country.[46] After the collapse of Saddam's regime much of the army and police forces quickly deserted. This caught the coalition forces off guard leaving much of the country without any form of law enforcement.[47] What portions of the Iraqi security apparatus remained were disbanded by Bremer and the CPA.[48] By 2004 the indigenous security forces in Iraq were not prepared to shoulder the burden of dealing with the deteriorating security situation.

Another major shift in strategy introduced by Gen. Casey was to move American troops out of the major urban areas into isolated and well defended bases on the outskirts of the cities. This move was most likely in response to domestic political pressure in the US as a response to the rising casualty rates among American troops as the insurgency unfolded. Other reasoning behind the move was to limit the presence of US troops in the streets and decrease the possibility of antagonizing the population.[49] Without a strong US presence in the cities, the weak and inexperienced Iraqi security forces were unable to handle the situation. Many Iraqis felt that the lack of contact with coalition personnel was leaving them vulnerable to attacks from insurgents as the Americans, "Sit in the same places as the former regime [and] pay just as little attention to the fears and aspirations of the Iraqi people.[50] When the Americans did conduct patrols they were generally done from inside Bradley armoured vehicles at speeds of 30-50km per hour, which the population saw as useless.[51] As insurgents took advantage of the power vacuum in the cities, the Americans responded with an increased use of force that didn't always discriminate between insurgent and civilian.[52] As the violence increased, the US implemented stronger force protection measures. Major roads and bridges were closed in order to funnel traffic into a network of manned checkpoints where misunderstandings between civilians and military personnel often became deadly.[53] These measures heavily disrupted efforts to reconstruct infrastructure and gave the Iraqis the impression that coalition forces were more concerned with protecting themselves than civilians.

The American and coalition forces had failed to win the 'hearts and minds' of the Iraqi people. An ABC News poll conducted in August 2007 found that 86 percent of Iraqis (99 percent of Sunnis and 91 percent of Shiites) had no confidence in the ability of US and UK forces to defeat the insurgency. Another statistic showed that 41 percent of Iraqis had experienced or had knowledge of coalition forces using excessive violence against civilians nearby.[54] The surge strategy that was implemented between 2007 and 2009 was effective in restoring security to the daily lives of most Iraqis, but the public opinion towards coalition forces had already soured. The surge gave Coalition forces enough manpower to develop Provincial Reconstruction Teams and Combat Outposts (COP). This allowed units to support the Iraqi police and security forces and improve their ability to provide security at the local level. After the deployment of surge forces was completed the level of violence dropped from around 1500 incidents per week to close to 300 incidents per week after the withdrawal of surge forces in June of 2009.[55] The eventual success of the surge and adaptation of a more balanced COIN strategy hints at how US fortunes could have been different had the administration better utilized the available intelligence prior to the 2003 invasion.

Conclusion

As both the examples of Northern Ireland and Iraq have shown, an understanding of both the military and political intelligence is key to a successful COIN strategy. If the British had understood that the IRA was working behind the scenes to instigate violence, they could have worked with the working-class Catholic communities (of whom they initially had support) to stabilize the situation. Equally, if the Bush administration had not ignored the historic evidence that there would be major security concerns in a post-Saddam Iraq, they could have better prepared American military forces to identify and deal with the insurgency before popular support for US operations began to decline.

One of the instances where a good balance of the use of intelligence was applied to precise and decisive force to counter an insurgency was in June of 2004. Colonel H. R. McMaster assumed command of the 3rd Armoured Cavalry Regiment (ACR) in Tall Afar. Upon the unit's arrival in Iraq he met with leaders in the community to admit previous mistakes and recommit to establishing security in the city. They worked with the local security forces to cut

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off the insurgency's logistics and at the suggestion of local leaders constructed a nine foot high sand barrier around the city to restrict movement in and out. Civilians were encouraged to leave the city for a brief time to a camp outside the city while US and Iraqi troops cleared the city block-by-block. They also constructed 29 security outposts where soldiers were stationed within the city. The unit gained the support of the community in the form of actionable intelligence that could be used to further break down the insurgency. By the end of the unit's deployment the rate of daily attacks had dropped from six to one.[56]

The US Marine Corps' 'Manual for Countering Irregular Threats' states that the success of COIN operations lies in winning the intelligence battle.[57] In a counterinsurgency, the key to gaining good intelligence on the enemy lies in gaining the support of the population.[58] Attacks on the population, either by the insurgent or via collateral damage from counterinsurgent responses will undermine their support for the government.[59] It is therefore necessary for the counterinsurgent forces to apply force in a way that is precise enough to limit its effect on the population, but decisive enough to neutralize the insurgent forces. In order to apply this kind of force it is necessary to have an understanding of both the political intelligence to understand the population, and military/operational intelligence to target the insurgency.

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