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PUBLIC SAFETY DURING COMBAT: A POSITIVE LESSON FROM VIETNAM

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The incredible success of General Tommy Franks' push to Baghdad in Operation Iraqi Freedom will be studied for years as the quintessential example of modern warfare. The Combined and Joint Forces of the Allied Coalition executed a strategy designed to be everywhere at once in order to render the Iraqi defender totally unable to establish a coherent defense. Even given the limitation of only one route of ground ingress (from Kuwait), the speed and agility of the ground forces, combined with the deep ISR and targeting assets of the Air Force and Army Aviation, and the economy of force efforts of the Special Operations elements, simply overwhelmed the ability of the Iraqi Army to defend. This was intentional, but at least one unintentional result of this unprecedented speed of maneuver must be addressed in all future planning: as enemy forces or individual combatants are bypassed and allowed to mix with noncombatants, the Decisive Phase of Campaign Operations will overlap with the Post-Conflict Phase. This dynamic must be planned for with a robust public safety capability that itself can overlap in time and space with combat operations.

The inability of CENTCOM forces to prevent lawless elements of the Iraqi population from looting and pillaging former Iraqi government buildings implies that this capability did not exist. Criticism that General Franks and his campaign planners failed to foresee this need is incorrect, however. Public response to the criticism highlighted the need for allied units present to complete their combat missions before switching to a police role, and the decision that force protection must take priority over the security of former Iraqi Ministry buildings. Both the criticism and the responses were disingenuous and missed the larger issue that, while the looting was politically distasteful, it was also detrimental to U.S. intelligence efforts in the search for WMD and links to global terrorist groups. Seen in this light, the priorities may need to shift, raising the problem of manpower. Who is available to maintain public order and safety if the combat forces are still consolidating on the objective? The answer is no one, which points to an organizational problem inherent in the U.S. government (USG).

In February 2003, the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute published a monograph entitled Reconstructing Iraq: Insights, Challenges, and Missions for Military Forces

in a Post-Conflict Scenario.¹ This monograph, the result of a series of seminars held earlier in the Fall of 2002, recognizes that past involvement of the U.S. military in peacekeeping and reconstruction operations have always met with some degree of lawlessness among the local population. The manner in which the military commander handled that lawlessness dictated in large part whether the operation was successful or not. The authors drew on the experiences of post-World War II occupations of Germany and Japan and on the more recent deployments to Haiti, Panama, and the Balkans.² Two lessons derived from Haiti in particular are worth mentioning. The first is that the military had to assume civil administration duties until other U.S. government agencies—specifically the State Department and its nation-builder, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)—could arrive in country. This unplanned-for mission creep included using soldiers to maintain law and order, but it was justified as a means for “lessened security risks.”³ Secondly, the redeployment of military forces cannot occur before the civil administration duties are handed off to either adequately resourced USG agencies or until the local government officials are capable of handling the jobs themselves.⁴

In the recommendations, however, for what the military planners should be preparing CENTCOM forces for in Iraq, the monograph does not mention anything about training or employing local police or emergency services such as firemen until six months past the end of the conflict. Even then it recommends that the Department of Justice (DOJ) and Department of State's International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Bureau (DOS INL) be the agencies responsible for this training, in conjunction with the Arab Police Academy.⁵ In a subsequent interview, Dr. Crane (one of the authors of Reconstructing Iraq: Insights, Challenges, and Missions for Military Forces in a Post-Conflict Scenario) allows that seminars could not determine how to handle this problem, and so made the assumption that in the interim six months, combat soldiers would be required to perform police duties.⁶

The authors quote a characterization of the 358th Civil Affairs (CA) Brigade's deployment to Haiti as “the *first* large scale implementation of a civil administration effort since World War II.”⁷ Both the authors and the 358th CA Brigade seem to have forgotten about the efforts of the Military Advisory Command-Vietnam's Civil Order and Rural Development (CORDS) program, which combined U.S. military and civilian advisors in a highly successful program to bring good governance to the villages of South Vietnam. In fact, Vietnam is mentioned only once in the monograph, and then as a failure, implying there is nothing to study from that period.⁸

Vietnam Lessons Applied

It appears that the fear of another Vietnam quagmire prevents an objective and balanced review of what did work well in that conflict. One area that worked extremely well, despite the Hanoi-led propaganda to the contrary, was the Agency for International Development's Public Safety Division (AID/PSD) and its support to South Vietnam's local, regional, and national police forces conducted under the CORDS umbrella.⁹ Since 1954, PSD's parent organization, the Office of Public Safety, has assisted 51 countries, totaling over 1.5 million policemen. It did so at a minimal cost, with only 320 advisors and \$5.5 Million committed to 24 countries around the world in 1972, including Vietnam.¹⁰ These programs provided advice, equipment, and training in tactics, techniques, and procedures preferable to a liberal democracy. PSD's success in helping Saigon secure their countryside is one reason given for Hanoi's initial phase of their

Tet '68 Offensive—to force combat units to return to previously secured rural areas.¹¹ Further successes, however, eventually led to PSD's downfall. First, in Vietnam, as Article 5 of the 1973 Paris Peace Accords insisted that the advisors be withdrawn from Vietnam.¹² Second, in Washington, when Congress incorrectly perceived that PSD and several other "aid" organizations had been infiltrated by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Both "failures" actually show the high opinion held of this organization by its friends and enemies alike. Failure, therefore, to include the PSD experience in providing security and stability planning for a factionalized and tribal society reduces the positive impact that history can have on military planning for the post-conflict phase.

Current doctrine and common sense requires the planning of Phase IV (Post-Combat) operations in conjunction with the entire campaign plan.¹³ Planning is an art that requires contributions from every element of a Combatant Commander's staff to ensure that each functional area is best represented by the plan and adequately resourced to accomplish the intended mission. Unfortunately, the military does not have inherent in its current force structure an organization that can conduct, much less plan for, the full range of public safety functions. Medical, public health, and the wide range of engineering specialties are all present in our uniformed services. Police functions are also present but have a doctrinal wartime mission of protecting our lines of communication and securing enemy prisoners of war. As importantly, we have few ground-oriented fire fighters in the service, having long since contracted out this static installation support mission.

The effect of the above capability gap became readily evident in the final days of Operation Iraqi Freedom, as our combat units were not prepared for the looting and burning of Baghdad in sectors already liberated. I do not argue that our lead combat units should have been ready, but someone should have. Reconstructing Iraq properly pointed out that civil order is an obligation that all occupying forces bear, and that transition does not equate to post-conflict.¹⁴ Indeed, a modern-day asymmetric ground defense provides a scenario where civil order is paramount to continuing military security operations through a given sector. This requires an organization separate from the combat forces, but working in tandem, to restore and maintain order, keeping noncombatants out of the fight and out of the way and protecting critical infrastructure from destruction.

During the Vietnam War, we had such an organization. USAID's PSD brought civilian public safety experts from all levels of government in the United States to advise and assist the government of South Vietnam in establishing their own civil order. Actions by this organization's personnel ranged from developing traffic laws to providing criminal investigative techniques for police detectives. Fire fighters were trained and equipped to put out fires in the heavily populated cities, while building codes and inspections were established to prevent them in the first place. PSD's efforts contributed greatly to the successes of the South Vietnamese Government in stabilizing the vast majority of its populated areas from the mid-1960's through 1973.¹⁵

Iraq has provided another model in which this type of organization would have proven itself useful. The style of General Franks' race into Baghdad left the Iraqi public safety apparatus in place. Following CENTCOM's instructions, Iraqi police and firemen essentially stayed home, but they were ready to be put back to work. An allied organization on the lines of

PSD, using American Senior Advisors and regional police and firemen, could flow into a population center with or just behind the combat forces, establish contact with the indigenous police force and, in essence, “re-hire” those not too entrenched with the former regime. This is what eventually happened in Baghdad and other places in Iraq, but not until media images of looting and pillaging forced the warfighters’ hands into an unplanned mission creep. For weeks after seizing Baghdad, we read about new units flowing into Baghdad with the mission of restoring order. The question is, should that be their job?

Resourcing the Capability

Our combat forces are flexible enough to accomplish any task given them, but their unit strengths are diluted when they are asked to be policemen. Saddam Hussein is not our only threat, nor is Iraq our only battlefield. Maneuver units, both Army and Marines, need to be reset as soon as possible for the next battle in this global war of terrorism.

Military Police are not suited for this role, even though they are currently being used in Iraq. This comment is not intended to insult the capabilities of our Military Police Corps, only to point out that as a High Demand, Low Density element, we do not have enough of them. Those we have available for deployment are typically not able to effectively advise on the creation, organization, and management of a national police force. To add to this, they have other important doctrinal missions that take precedence. Also, as stated, we do not have firemen in the ranks.

Contractors have a peculiar problem with long-term quality control and short-term responsiveness. Security often precludes the tendering of initial contracts until after the start of hostilities, which then initiates a lengthy process of hiring, vetting, and training before deployment. This means that a contracted force is not available for the critical planning of the campaign, and, since good stewardship prevents holding on to a contract of this sort between wars, the process would repeat itself with every contingency.

I contend that “civil order” requires civilian enforcement. Marshal law is just that—the law—but it should be an adjunct to the normal (civil) laws of the country in question. As much of the normalcy as possible should be preserved under marshal law, including the employment of those police and fire professionals who are so important to a functioning society. This should be pre-planned, with responsible forces identified prior to initiating hostilities. The pace of modern warfare demands it, as does the humanitarian spirit of the American public. Since the current military does not own the body of knowledge needed to plan or execute this mission concurrent with combat operations, the only organization that has successfully accomplished these tasks should be re-constituted and its historical successes replicated.

Ideally, this should be a totally civilian organization. While Public Safety Division was formerly under USAID, it may better fit in today’s governmental structure under the DOS INL Bureau. The Department of State, however, is neither organized nor funded for contingency operations that could function at the speed the U.S. military requires. A good argument can be made that, for budgetary purposes, responsiveness, and unity of command the Department of Defense (DOD) should create this capability under the umbrella of the newly-formed Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA). Conversely, some may argue that the

benefit of involving the interagency into future transitions would be lost if this piece of the national objectives was a DOD entity. This argument would say it is better to use civil security and stability as the initial phase of our own transition from combat operations through marshal law to the establishment of a functional, indigenous capability for democratic self-governance. I believe that while transition objectives would logically place it in a civilian agency, the simultaneity of an Operation Iraqi Freedom-style campaign supports the capability of being a DOD asset for ease of coordination.

Even if re-established as a DOD organization, the personnel of a new PSD should be drawn from the readily available active and retired police and fire officials, especially those with vast experience in international police advisory roles. This is important to provide a degree of separation between the military mission and the benign public safety one. Using native-speaking and culturally aware police professionals from the region provides not only a link to the local people, but it also provides our regional friends a “noncombatant” and humanitarian means of supporting the coalition. These regional advisors would ideally assist in vetting the local police and firemen, and they could be withdrawn as a long-term relationship is established by the U.S. public safety organization.

The best method for manning this capability is through a direct hiring process, where a corps of the senior advisors are hired as DOD employees, fluent in the concept and prepared to participate in the deliberate planning process of each Combatant Commander. The possibility that this organization could be stood up as a Reserve or National Guard unit is worth considering, but a certain number of the key planners need to be full-time civilians.

Conclusion

The idea that civil order is impossible in a “non-permissive environment” is historically wrong. Stability operations have been conducted throughout the intensity levels of past wars and lesser contingencies. They should not be “on order” missions for combat forces, but “as needed” missions for a dedicated noncombatant organization. Planners should not assume that civil services would continue behind an advancing combat force, which it seems was an assumption made by our forces moving into Baghdad. Nor should a soldier ever be confused by rules of engagement (ROE) that change with every block. If needed, this same soldier is on call should a police function require combat support during the transition from Decisive Combat Operations to the Post-Conflict Phase. But the transition has to be planned for, resourced, and initiated prior to the end of combat operations. Following the Vietnam-era USAID Public Safety Division’s model, this critical mission of providing public safety immediately behind the leading edge of advancing combat forces can be executed. We just have to plan for it.

The views expressed in this academic paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Government, the Department of Defense, or any of its agencies.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Conrad C Crane and W. Andrew Terrill, Reconstructing Iraq: Insights, Challenges, and Missions for Military Forces in a Post-Conflict Scenario (Carlisle Barracks: U.S. Army War College, Feb 2003).

² Ibid., 3-16.

³ Ibid., 7.

⁴ Ibid., 8.

⁵ Ibid., 66.

⁶ Verbal interview with author, Carlisle Barracks, 17 April 2003.

⁷ Emphasis added. Crane, 7, as quoted from “Memorandum from 358th Civil Affairs Brigade to CG, U.S. Army Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations Command,” Subject: After Action Report, USACOM Operation Uphold/Maintain Democracy, May 26, 1995, p.3, USACOM CD-ROM.

⁸ Ibid., 17.

⁹ CORDS was created by fusing the former U.S. Embassy Office of Civil Operations with its military counterpart Revolutionary Development Support Directorate under the Military Assistance Command- Vietnam. See Charles B. MacDonald and Charles V. P. Luttichau, “The U.S. Army in Vietnam” American Military History (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972) 636.

¹⁰ Byron Engle, “A.I.D. Assistance to Civil Security: The Office of Public Safety,” The Police Chief, May 1972. Reprint (Gaithersburg, MD: The International Association of Chiefs of Police, 1972) 2.

¹¹ David T. Zabecki, “Battle for Saigon,” Vietnam Magazine Summer 1989, Vol. 2, no. 1, pp 19-25. As reprinted in David R. Brooks and Brian D. Moore, eds., Indochina: Tet 1968 and the 1972 Easter Offensive (Carlisle Barracks: U.S. Army War College, 6 January 2003) 36.

¹² William P. Rogers, et al., “Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Viet-Nam,” United States Treaties and Other International Agreements Vol. 24, Part 1, 1973 (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1974) 7.

¹³ John P. Abizaid, Joint Doctrine for Campaign Planning (Joint Pub 5-00.1) (Washington D.C.: The Joint Staff, 25 January 2002) II-4 – 5.

¹⁴ Crane, 12.

¹⁵ See for example Thomas W. Scoville, Reorganizing for Pacification Support (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1982) 54 and 82. For a South Vietnamese perspective, see Cao Van Vien, et. Al., The U.S. Adviser (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980) 142.