

DoD Vehicle Decals Should Be Discontinued
Contemporary Issues Paper
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to
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INTRODUCTION

As I perused the air fresheners and steering wheel covers at a local car wash in Northern Virginia a few weeks ago, I noticed a luxury sedan as it approached the end of the wash cycle. In the lower driver's side corner of the windshield, I discerned a dark blue Department of Defense (DoD) decal. The decal was for Marine Corps Base Quantico and was accompanied by sticker bearing a Colonel's eagle. The automatic wash cycle ended, the car was blasted with hot air, and the worker from the car wash sped off to the staging area to wipe down the car. Imagine instead that the worker at the car wash gets in the car, speeds off to the staging area, plants a small explosive charge under the dashboard, and then proceeds to wipe down the car and receive a generous tip for his hard work.

A week later, while riding a bicycle at a nearby state park, I encountered a similar vehicle. In this case, the vehicle was a nice Sports Utility Vehicle (SUV) adorned with the rank of a Brigadier General, also from MCB Quantico. The SUV was quietly parked in the tranquil environs of the state park. Consider the SUV, seemingly undisturbed, with a forty pound charge of C-4 attached to the gas tank while the owner is off on a sylvan jaunt.

In both cases, the DoD vehicle decals identified targets for opportunistic terrorists. Consequently, the United States

Marine Corps should discontinue the use of DoD vehicle decals because they are obsolete, they pose a serious threat to the operational security and force protection of American DoD personnel, and they are inefficient.

DOD DECALS ARE OBSOLETE

The Department of Defense vehicle decal, officially known as the DD Form 2220, was developed in the 1970s to streamline vehicle registration and assist in traffic management on military installations¹. At the time of its introduction, a nationwide database did not exist to keep track of vehicles. The decal was in no way viewed as a security enhancement although some people have since misconstrued the decal to exist for this reason. Prior to 11 September 2001, a DoD decal was all one needed to attain access to a military base. Sentries scrutinized the vehicle instead of the individual driving the vehicle. As long as the decal was valid, a check of the individual's military identification card was unnecessary.

Times have changed, however. On 11 September 2001, conventional rule books for waging war were thrown out. The threat to the American way of life took on a new meaning and a new visage. The DoD needed to honor that threat and

¹ Senior Master Sergeant Matt Proietti, Air Force Press Release Number 08-08-07, "Air Force Discontinues the Use of Base Decals," 22 August 2007, URL:<<http://www.af.mil/news/story.asp?id=123065226>>, accessed 07 January 2008.

accordingly, the security policy for gaining access to military bases has been heightened since 9/11. All United States military installations require sentries to perform a 100% military identification card check of those seeking base access. With the 100% ID card check for employees, the decal is obsolete. In fact, not only do the decals no longer serve their original purpose, but they also present a force protection issue.

DECALS INCREASE RISK

The current threat to American civilization is potent. The enemy of today is a shape-shifting, unscrupulous terrorist. The threat is ubiquitous and difficult to detect. Today's terrorist is a smart, internet-savvy zealot working for what he perceives to be a greater cause. The cave-ridden, destitute Third World countryside as portrayed on Cable News Network (CNN) is not the only place to find terrorists anymore. Terrorists have infiltrated the American society and culture as illustrated by the profiles of the 9/11 criminals. Hordes of individuals are recruited daily to take up arms against the United States and the American way of life. These recruits come from every continent and every walk of life. Even the virtual world has been tapped as a way to recruit and galvanize an army of Jihadists who are bound and determined to overcome what they perceive to be American oppression. Potential terrorists can go

on the internet and receive simulated training at a number of virtual training camps². The prospects and implications of this capability are mind-boggling. Anti-American and anti-Western sentiment is an epidemic and can reach anyone who has a portal to the internet.

Ironically, despite heightened concerns about homeland security, the Department of Defense never reconsidered the utility of vehicle decals, even after the September 11 attacks. Americans are trained to be "hard targets"—that is, difficult to detect. Force protection training has been revamped accordingly and includes various methods that American service members can employ to retain a low profile. Here are some examples:

- 1) Not wearing a uniform to work.
- 2) Varying your route to work.
- 3) Not traveling in uniform.
- 4) Licensing cars in the states in which service members are stationed.

Decals on the vehicles of DoD employees are beacons for terrorists. They are simple to discern and are even color-coded to distinguish between different ranks and classifications. Decals provide locations and the amount of information that can be gleaned from a DoD sticker is appalling. The geographic

² Natalie O'Brien, *the Australian*, "Virtual Terrorists," 31 July 2007, URL:<<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25297,22161037-28737.html>>, accessed 07 January 2008.

locations of sensitive American installations are prime target hotbeds, especially bases that house intercontinental ballistic missile submarines or special forces units. The United States is still a global super power but that does not mean that American service members and DoD employees should boast about it by adorning their vehicles with a nametag. American DoD employees present "soft targets"—easy kills to any terrorist with common sense, and the continued use of DoD stickers is borderline gross negligence.

For example, a vehicle in San Diego, California, with a blue Marine Corps Air Station Miramar decal probably belongs to a Marine pilot. If one couples that blue DoD decal with the squadron sticker that many proudly display, little is left to deduce. In fact, anyone who sees that particular DoD decal can easily guess what type of aircraft the car's owner flies. Moreover, if the car has a Colonel's eagle sticker, the car belongs to either a Marine Aircraft Group commander, the base commander, or a high ranking staff member of the 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing. Taking that further, all of the Colonels and above stationed at MCAS Miramar can be found by looking at the official website of the United States Marine Corps, www.usmc.mil, and navigating the website from there. Anyone with an internet connection is armed with all of the open source information about the Marine Corps. Continuing with the MCAS

Miramar example, a person with an internet connection can find the names, biographies, and photographs of all the key leaders at Miramar. By using the pictures and names from the internet, one can triangulate exactly who is behind the wheel. A little diligence and a nefarious mind can make for a capable and effective enemy.

DOD DECALS ARE INEFFICIENT AND COSTLY

Several issues exist with the DD Form 2220. The most glaring problem is its lack of compatibility both within the Armed Forces and within civilian law enforcement agencies. For example, a vehicle with a sticker from an Army installation cannot be found in the system used by Navy, Marine Corps, or Air Force. The same is true for the opposite situations³. Furthermore, no interface exists between the DoD and civilian Departments of Transportation. To cite an example once again, if a vehicle with an Air Force sticker was abandoned on a Marine Corps base, the Marines would have to run the vehicle license plates through the civilian system to find the owner. The DoD sticker only complicates matters.

In 2005, the Air Force started to question the value of the DoD sticker. DoD decals are not only administratively burdensome but also costly. The Air Force spent \$727,000 in

³ Senior Master Sergeant Matt Proietti

2005 just to print decals⁴. This amount does not include the number of man hours required to staff the vehicle registration centers or the man hours that are lost by service members who have to wait in line to register their vehicles. The Security Battalion of MCB Quantico has redirected its mobile command center twice a week to the back gate for the sole purpose of issuing on-the-spot vehicle registration stickers. Those Marines and assets could be more efficiently employed if DoD stickers were no longer used.

Several other reasons exist to support discontinuing DoD stickers. First, the decals are easy to counterfeit. Second, while a glaring security issue, one can find DoD stickers on cars at used car lots. Third, if a person steals a vehicle from a service member, another security breach has occurred. Finally, if a person leaves the service, he or she can easily drive around with an unauthorized sticker on his or her vehicle until the sticker expires⁵. Expiration dates of DoD decals are not related to the expiration of a person's service commitment, and no requirement exists for turning in one's DoD sticker upon leaving the service.

COUNTERARGUMENTS

⁴ Airman First Class Wesley Wright, Minot Air Force Base Public Affairs Office, "Base to Stop Issuing Windshield Decals, Register POVs," 15 February 2007, URL:<<http://www.minot.af.mil/news/story.asp?id=123041254>>, accessed 07 January 2008.

⁵ Senior Master Sergeant Matt Proietti

The DD Form 2220 has existed for almost forty years, and many feel that it still has a purpose. In an article written for the MCB Quantico base newspaper, *the Sentry*, on 20 July 2006, the Military Police Company's Operations Officer at the time, Captain Daniel Arispe, claims that "Department of Defense decals show us that we can trust the person in the vehicle."⁶ This mindset breeds complacency. A sentry that trusts a person in a vehicle due to a sticker is not doing his job. An effective sentry must thoroughly validate each vehicle's inhabitants to ensure that only authorized personnel populate U. S. military bases. The United States has paid millions of dollars to bolster the entry points to bases, but those funds are spent in vain if the sentinel at the control point does not screen persons properly for access to the base.

CONCLUSION

Department of Defense vehicle decals have served their purpose. Nevertheless, since every base in the United States has incorporated a 100% military identification check, DoD decals are no longer necessary. Considering the force protection and operational security issues surrounding the use of the decals, the argument for discontinuing them becomes stronger. Amidst the Global War on Terror with the enemy

⁶ Private Andrew S. Keirn, *Quantico Sentry Online*, "DoD Decals a Must For Base Vehicles," 20 July 2006, URL:<<http://www.quantico.usmc.mil/Sentry/StoryView.aspx?SID=373>>, accessed 07 January 2008.

lurking in every corner of the globe, the security posture of the United States must reflect the current threat and make the enemy's job as difficult as possible.

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