

*United States Marine Corps  
Command and Staff College  
Marine Corps University  
2076 South Street  
Marine Corps Combat Development Command  
Quantico, Virginia 22134-5068*

**MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES**

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**HELL-BENT ON FORCE PROTECTION:  
CONFUSING TROOP WELFARE WITH MISSION ACCOMPLISHMENT IN  
COUNTERINSURGENCY**

**SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
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**MAJOR TRENT A. GIBSON, UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS**

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Mentor and Oral Defense Committee Member: ELIN M SIMPSON  
Approved: [Signature]  
Date: 8 Apr 2009

Oral Defense Committee Member: Francis Marlo  
Approved: [Signature]  
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## Executive Summary

**Title:** Hell-bent on Force Protection: Confusing Troop Welfare with Mission Accomplishment in Counterinsurgency

**Author:** Major Trent Gibson, United States Marine Corps

**Thesis:** The American military's conventional mindset, magnified by misperceptions of the American public's casualty intolerance, has allowed force-protection to trump mission accomplishment in the execution of counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan. The success of our counterinsurgency efforts will be determined not by our effectiveness at making near-term investments in force protection, but by our effectiveness at accepting near-term risks in order to make long-term investments in security, and thus, force-protection.

**Discussion:** Force-protection fetishism, based upon our political and military leaders' false notions of the American public's casualty aversion, affects our military's tactical employment in three ways: armorizing, employment of forward operating bases (FOBs), and the application of heavy firepower. Each of these measures has the effect of separating Soldiers and Marines either physically or psychologically from the populace that they're supposed to be engaging and protecting. However, when counterinsurgent troops are separated from the populace, thereby isolating them from their operational center of gravity, their prospects for strategic success are fundamentally limited, if not entirely ruined. Our military leaders must therefore apply the appropriate counterinsurgency lessons from the Iraq surge, specifically the *clear-hold-build* concept, and embrace the tactical risks necessary for operational and strategic success. The American Military must transform its conventional mindset, discard its misperceptions of casualty aversion, and purge its collective conscience of force-protection fetishism in order to meet the realities and paradoxes of counterinsurgency.

**Conclusion:** To succeed in Afghanistan, our military leaders at all levels must have the fortitude necessary to embrace the near-term risks involved in implementing sound counterinsurgency doctrine and accept the inevitable increase in casualties that will accompany the assumption of greater risk. Those near-term casualties, however, will eventually translate into long-term security, for both our forces and the Afghan populace. Long-term security will, in turn, ultimately translate into mission accomplishment and thus fewer overall casualties, both friendly and civilian. In short, we need to embrace the tactical risks necessary for operational and strategic success. It is time to put our money where our mouth is, steel ourselves for the casualties that may occur in the near-term, and get on with winning this fight.

## INTRODUCTION

*"Although we minimized risk wherever we could, we quickly realized force protection cannot be paramount. First and foremost is the mission."*<sup>1</sup>

- LtCol Bruce A. Gandy

In the wake of OPERATION ALLIED FORCE, NATO's air-only punitive bombing campaign against Serbian forces in 1999, a furor ensued in the American media. The crux of the issue was that, due to the White House's refusal to commit ground troops to the campaign (founded in an aversion to take casualties over an issue not obviously threatening American vital interests), Serbian forces were allowed to continue their campaign of ethnic cleansing while Slobodan Milosevic held out for favorable terms in a cease-fire agreement with NATO.<sup>2</sup> Thus the issue of casualty aversion reared its ugly head, linked inextricably to the concept of force protection.

Ten years later the United States finds itself in the middle of two separate counterinsurgency (COIN) campaigns, with over 4,800 casualties on the books and many more in the offing as it prepares to assume a larger role in NATO operations in southern Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup> The man now in charge of American forces in these two operations, General David H. Petraeus, oversaw two years ago the preparation and publication of the Army and Marines' new *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, a doctrinal publication which urges its readers to, above all, learn and adapt.<sup>4</sup> As the book's introduction explains, "Adapting occurs as Soldiers and Marines apply what they have learned through study and experience, assess the results of their actions, and continue to learn during operations."<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, it is time for military professionals to assess the effectiveness of our current operations in Afghanistan with regard to our COIN doctrine, and then ask the hard question: Are our force-protection measures relevant to counterinsurgency, or are they more focused on 'troop welfare' than mission accomplishment?

In order to establish a frame of reference for our assessment, it is necessary to first clarify what is meant by *force protection*. Force protection is defined as ‘actions taken to prevent or mitigate hostile actions against personnel, resources, facilities and critical information.’<sup>6</sup> There are two general categories of force-protection measures, passive and active. Passive measures (*material* actions) are actions oriented on friendly forces, such as ‘armorizing’ or fortification, which a military unit utilizes to physically protect itself against enemy attack; passive measures are, by their nature, intended to mitigate near-term risks.

Active measures (*procedural* actions) fall into two categories: conventional and unconventional. In the *conventional* category, active force-protection measures are directed at *enemy* forces – actions (such as aggressive patrolling or use of firepower) that a military unit takes to forestall an enemy attack or mitigate the effects of an attack; like passive measures, these are also intended to mitigate near-term risks. In the *unconventional* category, however, active force-protection measures are directed at *the populace and its government*, and include such actions as non-intrusive security patrols to facilitate civil assessment; interaction and intelligence gathering; integration with host-nation security forces; providing essential services to the populace; information operations; and building relationships with civil leaders. Therefore, unlike passive measures and conventional active measures, which are focused on near-term risk mitigation, unconventional force-protection measures are focused on long-term risk-mitigation through investment in security and development. This fundamental difference has crucial implications for COIN operations.

Unfortunately, American forces – nearly eight years into the fight – are only now beginning to employ unconventional force-protection measures during operations in Afghanistan to the degree mandated by its doctrine.<sup>7</sup> Thus the military’s conventional mindset, magnified by

misperceptions of the American public's casualty intolerance, has allowed force-protection to trump mission accomplishment in the execution of counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan.<sup>8</sup> The success of our counterinsurgency efforts will be determined, not by our effectiveness at making near-term investments in force protection, but by our effectiveness at accepting near-term risks in order to make long-term investments in security, and thus, force-protection.

It is not the purpose of this paper to address the strategic impact of casualty aversion and force protection on foreign policy. The focus of this paper is more narrow, addressing only those military actions that fall within the scope of force protection at the tactical level, how those actions are shaped by casualty aversion, and how they ultimately influence mission accomplishment (i.e. the success or failure of operational and/or strategic military objectives within the overall COIN effort). The questions therein that we have to ask ourselves concerning force protection and mission accomplishment are as follows: Is the American public actually casualty averse, or is this a misperception by our political and military leaders? Does casualty aversion, either real or perceived, cause our military leaders to prioritize force protection over mission accomplishment? In what ways does our military prioritize force protection over mission accomplishment? And lastly, are our force-protection measures relevant to mission accomplishment in the Afghan counterinsurgency, or are they focused more on troop welfare? Together, these questions lead us back to an age-old issue: Which is more important – troop welfare or mission accomplishment? This paper will answer these questions.

## CASUALTY AVERSION

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*"We fight so as not to lose the force, rather than fighting by using the force at any cost to achieve the aim." <sup>9</sup>*

- General Rupert Smith

One of the first questions that naturally arise from a discussion of American involvement

in modern war concerns casualty aversion – namely, “How do you balance friendly casualties with popular support for the war, which will ultimately affect mission accomplishment?” The belief that the American public’s support for war decreases in proportion to the number of casualties incurred is so commonly-held that it has attained the status of ‘conventional wisdom.’

This conventional wisdom claims that the American public is highly casualty-averse, and that public support for any given conflict will therefore dwindle once the body bags start coming home. Much has been written in the past two decades on the sources of this perceived casualty aversion and the topic has been well researched.<sup>10</sup> However, a series of RAND studies conducted in the ‘80s and ‘90s, followed up with a study by the Triangle Institute for Strategic Studies (TISS) in 1999 prove this ‘conventional wisdom’ to be a fallacy.<sup>11</sup>

The evidence, from the TISS study especially, suggests that the American public is rather discriminating in regards to casualties and support for war, distinguishing between conflicts that appear to be of high concern to our national interest and those that do not. In forming its opinion the public is receptive to the tone set by political leaders and to the “democratic conversation” that results. The public then discerns the relative value of each side of the argument, weighing the potential costs and benefits of the conflict, as well as the prospects for success and overall expectations of its conduct.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, the American public supports those conflicts that our political leaders are able to sell as being vital to our national security. We only begin withdrawing our support not when casualties mount, but rather when our political leaders fail to convince us that such sacrifice is worth the cost and that progress in the war is being made.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast, public support *is* historically poor for those conflicts in which casualties are possible (or incurred) and there is a weak connection between the conflict and what the public perceives as vital national interests. As explained by reporter Dan Lindley, in reference to

American military interventions from Lebanon to Kosovo, “The US prefers the safety of our soldiers (force protection) more than risking them to accomplish such missions as arresting war criminals or... performing ‘community policing’.”<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the public does not gauge military success by numbers of soldiers killed or wounded, but rather by more practical measures of necessity and progress toward the political goal – towards, in a COIN scenario for instance, the ‘winning of hearts and minds’ that most experts identify as the factor most critical to success. What ultimately matters to the public during a conflict in which lives and national treasure are on the line is not the number of body bags coming home, but progress toward success.<sup>15</sup> Put simply, the conventional wisdom that American society is casualty-averse is nothing more than a myth.<sup>16</sup>

If casualty aversion is a myth, then, why is this concept so persistent in our national conscience? The answer to this question is not found in the *why*, but rather the *where*. Casualty aversion resides, not with the public, but with our nation’s political and military leadership. The 1999 TISS Study mentioned above “reveals that civilian policy makers – even more so, senior military officers – are much more casualty intolerant than the average American citizen.”<sup>17</sup> This is because, as one American military officer explains, “...senior military leaders have attributed to the public an aversion to casualties that does not, in fact, exist.” The exact magnitude of that disparity – between the number of deaths the public will accept and the number that military leaders presume the public will accept – has significant implications for military operations, from the tactical to the strategic.<sup>18</sup> Firstly, at the tactical level, this perceived casualty aversion manifests itself most prominently in what Dr. Jeffrey Record calls ‘force-protection fetishism’.<sup>19</sup>

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This tactical-level manifestation, however, has both an operational and a strategic impact.



## FORCE-PROTECTION 'FETISHISM'

*"The more you protect your force, the less secure you may be."*<sup>20</sup>

- FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency Field Manual

Where does this force-protection fetishism come from? Dr. Record argues that it is a product of our Vietnam experience and its resultant Weinberger-Powell Doctrine (which mandates that we enter conflicts only for definable and vital reasons, and with overwhelming force), validated by Lebanon and Somalia, and characterized by a misperception by the military elite that our nation's populace does not have the stomach for casualties, "regardless of the circumstances in which they are incurred."<sup>21</sup> He illustrates his argument by describing how this fetishism manifested itself during Operation Allied Force in Kosovo, in which we forswore the commitment of ground troops, opting instead to conduct an exclusively aerial campaign against the Serbian army.<sup>22</sup> Though this example is from a conventional conflict that took place almost a decade ago, the point that it makes is no less valid today in our COIN operations in Afghanistan. Indeed, the point is even more pressing today, for our interests in Kosovo were limited, whereas those in Afghanistan are of much greater import.

Why is force-protection fetishism of such importance to our COIN effort in Afghanistan, a conflict that a majority of the American public still considers to be in our national interest?<sup>23</sup> Because this fetishism, borne of a misperceived casualty aversion, "shifts the burden of risk" to those whom our mission is intended to protect.<sup>24</sup> This burden of risk, then – in the case of our COIN operations in Afghanistan – is shifted away from our own troops and onto the civilian populace. To better understand this problem, it is useful to refer back to the distinction between conventional and unconventional categories of force protection at the beginning of this paper.

Having done so, we see that it is our *conventional* notion of force protection – in which the physical security of our force is achieved through risk-averse procedures and material solutions –

that has blinded us to the long-term implications of these near-term measures in a COIN environment. In the *unconventional* environment of a counterinsurgency, what seems to be *counterintuitive* to a conventionally trained Soldier or Marine, such as not responding to the provocation of an enemy attack, may actually prove to be the best, *logical* option.

Hence FM 3-24's explicit rendering of the *Paradoxes of Counterinsurgency*, one of which states that, "*The more you protect your force, the less secure you may be.*" This paradox conveys the fundamental truth that in COIN operations, success is gained through ensuring the security of the populace, *not* the security of our own troops.<sup>25</sup> Yet in both pre-surge Iraq and in Afghanistan, our force-protection fetishism has at times physically separated and at other times psychologically alienated Soldiers and Marines from the very populace whom they are supposed to be securing, and in doing so, have placed that populace at greater risk. However, as our COIN doctrine explains, it is the security of the populace that is the ultimate measure of our success, our very strategic objective. Therefore our every tactical action should be focused, in one way or another, on achieving second-order, operational effects that will serve to ultimately meet that objective. In a COIN environment, though, casualty-phobic, force-protection measures prove counter-productive to mission accomplishment, as Andrew Krepinevich points out in his critique of the US Army's firepower-centric mindset in Vietnam:

"The characteristics of the Army Concept [the US Army's approach to warfare] are two: a focus on mid-intensity, or conventional, war and a reliance on high volumes of firepower to minimize casualties – in effect, the substitution of material costs at every available opportunity to avoid payment in blood."<sup>26</sup>

"The use of massed firepower as a crutch in lieu of an innovative counterinsurgency strategy alienated the population and provided the enemy with an excellent source of propaganda."<sup>27</sup>

Krepinevich attributes this mentality in part to "the recognition by the brass of the political necessity which demanded that every possible measure be taken by American commanders to minimize U.S. casualties."<sup>28</sup> Thus the myth of casualty aversion and its resultant force-

protection fetishism amongst military leaders is not a new phenomenon, and as it did in Vietnam, it creates a dangerous disconnect in our contemporary COIN operations.

This disconnect occurs at the tactical level, between our military force's tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs), and the operational and strategic objectives that those TTPs are being implemented to achieve. If, for example, our operational objective in Helmand province in southern Afghanistan is to gain the confidence and trust of the civilian populace in order to empower and legitimize the Afghan government, then a US air strike against a village from which Taliban forces have attacked an Afghan National Army unit – as occurred on the night of May 8, 2007, killing twenty-one civilians (most of them women and children)<sup>29</sup> – then those tactical actions have had an immediate and negative impact on the operational objective of legitimizing the Afghan government. The disconnect here between operational ends and tactical means is clear.

How does force-protection fetishism affect our tactical employment and, ultimately, our operational and strategic objectives? In three ways: armorizing, employment of forward operating bases (FOBs), and the application of heavy firepower. Each of these measures has the effect of separating Soldiers and Marines either physically or psychologically from the populace that they're supposed to be engaging and protecting. However, when counterinsurgent troops are separated from the populace, thereby isolating them from their operational center of gravity, their prospects for strategic success are fundamentally limited, if not entirely ruined.

## PROTECTING THE FORCE BY 'ARMORIZING'

"Get out and walk—move, work dismounted." <sup>30</sup>

- Lieutenant General Ray Odierno

Protection of our military forces in COIN is achieved primarily (at the tactical level) through the application of technology, namely through material armor solutions to the threat posed by insurgent firepower. Our military's emphasis on armor protection, driven by the high value that our society places on human life, is facilitated – actually perpetuated – by our technological capabilities. This technological focus is itself originally a result of our competition with peer competitors in the arena of conventional military technology, and has in recent years been further driven by competition with our unconventional, asymmetrical competitors. The entire history of warfare is marked by the *evolution* of technology and tactics, and that evolution is *driven* by competition. Indeed, the most significant advancements in our military capability are the products of competition with conventional peer competitors, from the machinegun to the atomic bomb, stealth aircraft, and precision-guided weapons. Thus our military capabilities are primarily *conventionally* oriented. When we enter an *unconventional* fight, however, against an asymmetrically-minded enemy who will take every opportunity to leverage our conventional capabilities against us, our conventional strengths become weaknesses. A perfect illustration of this is seen in the evolution of armored vehicles in Iraq, driven by the competition against Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs).

Compelled by an urgent desire to maximize the survivability of our Soldiers and Marines against the rapidly evolving threat of IEDs and mines, and fueled by the American propensity to engineer a technical solution to any and all challenges, 'armorizing' emerged as the dominant force-protection measure in response to the nascent insurgency in Iraq. Armorizing (equipping personnel or equipment with armor or other protective devices) our forces against high-explosive

blast effect quickly became one of the most visible and contested public issues in the early stages of our COIN effort in Iraq. Following the end of the ground offensive, Iraqi insurgents began employing IEDs against coalition military personnel in the vicinity of the Sunni Triangle in Fall 2003 in an effort to inflict casualties without exposing themselves to direct-fire engagements with coalition forces who possessed superior firepower. In response to the emerging IED threat, “Coalition forces soon adapted... by up-armorizing their vehicles. However, insurgents responded by developing both more powerful and technically sophisticated devices...”<sup>31</sup> A competition between the use of force (IEDs) and force-protection measures (armorizing vehicles) thus ensued. This competition drove the evolution of both IEDs and vehicle armor, with insurgents attempting to stay one step ahead of the technological capabilities of coalition forces.

A fundamental truth that arose from this technological competition was the fact that insurgents would adapt their level of force (power and sophistication of IEDs) in order to meet the threat presented by coalition armor. A couple of examples from the author’s experiences in Al Qa’im, Iraq in 2004 illustrate this fact.<sup>32</sup> In an effort to better protect their dismounted infantry during operations, the Marines in Al Qa’im began employing lightly armored Assault Amphibian Vehicles (AAVs) in 2004 to augment their HMMWVs, which had proven susceptible to both IEDs and mines, and were in limited supply. The conventional thinking was “the more armor, the better.” For the most part, the AAVs proved useful for both mobility and relative protection against IEDs and mines, but the up-armorizing mentality would eventually reap unexpected benefits for the insurgents. A tragic (but not surprising) incident occurred near Haditha – a year following our battalion’s departure from Al Qa’im – in which fourteen Marines were killed in a single IED attack, illustrating the point to which the *Armor vs. IED* competition had evolved in Al Anbar province.<sup>33</sup>

Yet another example of the Marine Corps' focus on material force-protection measures, in the ever-escalating *Armor vs. IED* competition, is the MRAP (Mine Resistant, Ambush Protected) vehicle. These 14-ton vehicles have been developed over the past few years in an effort to better protect Marines against increasingly lethal IED attacks. These vehicles have enjoyed an unprecedented survival rate against IED and mine attacks, with the Marines reporting to Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in 2006 that no Marines had been killed in 300 documented attacks against MRAPs.<sup>34</sup> Though the MRAP is a proven lifesaver in the high-explosive threat environment of Iraq, two of the most pertinent criticisms of the MRAP's suitability in a COIN environment are its relative lack of both mobility and visibility, both of which are significant handicaps in the ambush-friendly, restricted terrain that comprises most of Afghanistan.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, its massive size not only restricts its mobility in urban areas, but also intimidates, causing a greater disconnect between troops and the local populace during COIN operations.

Andrew Krepinevich and Dakota Wood underscore this issue, asserting that the MRAP creates a "doctrinal disconnect" between mission accomplishment and force protection, arguing that though they satisfy the moral imperative of reducing casualties, they may be doing so at the expense of accomplishing the COIN mission by creating second-order effects that might actually increase casualties in the long run.<sup>36</sup> This same conclusion was emphasized in the March 2006 Defense Science Board's report to the Secretary of Defense on Iraq COIN operations:

"The most effective force protection measure in Iraq has been constructive "engagement" with the local population... Many technologies, however, have tended to create barriers between U.S. military personnel and the local population, especially individual passive technologies (e.g., ...vehicle armor, ...etc.). In that sense, they may be counterproductive in certain settings."<sup>37</sup>

Lieutenant General Ray Odierno, in a more direct approach to this issue, put it this way:

"Get out and walk—move, work dismounted. Vehicles like the up-armored HMMWV limit our situational awareness and insulate us from the Iraqi people we intend to serve. They also make us predictable, often obliging us to move slowly along established routes. These vehicles offer protection, but they do so at the cost of a great deal of effectiveness."<sup>38</sup>

In the final analysis, so long as our response to physical threats from contemporary insurgents “consists chiefly of improved ways to protect vehicles against IEDs, we expose [ourselves to] vulnerabilities that others will exploit.”<sup>39</sup> These vulnerabilities lie chiefly in our misplaced emphasis on ‘protection of the force’ above all else, indeed above our mission: security of the populace.

## PROTECTING THE FORCE BY ‘USE OF FORCE’

*“In this century, as the United States has had a resource advantage over each of her adversaries, firepower and technology have evolved as substitutes for precious manpower. Indeed, the Army even has a statement for it: ‘It is better to send a bullet than a man.’”*<sup>40</sup>

- Andrew Krepinevich

While armorizing is the conventional warfare practitioner’s near-term *material* solution to force protection, so the ‘use of force’ is his near-term *procedural* solution. This use of force – owing its legacy, like our engineered material solutions, to the American love of technology – is manifested most readily in the application of superior (read: *heavier, deadlier, more accurate*) firepower. Like our material solutions, this procedural solution is a product of our conventional warfare mindset: *If the enemy is the problem, then firepower must be the solution.* However, this conventionally-minded reliance on firepower is having a negative affect on our COIN effort in Afghanistan, due to the production of collateral damage.<sup>41</sup>

The conventional, firepower-centric approach that characterizes the American Way of War has been shaped primarily through our experiences in the large-scale, conventional conflicts of WWI, WWII, and Korea.<sup>42</sup> However, in Vietnam, though our forces enjoyed tactical success throughout the duration of the conflict, they eventually suffered strategic defeat due to a predominantly conventional mindset. Despite the relative progress of populace-based COIN efforts such as the Special Forces’ Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDG), the Marines’

Combined Action Program (CAP), and MACV's Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development and Support (CORDS) program, such success was ultimately diluted by the failures of Westmoreland's earlier conventional strategy and its resultant squandering of political support for the war.<sup>43</sup>

We are not the only ones to suffer from the results of a conventional mindset in COIN operations, though. In both American Vietnam and Soviet Afghanistan, "the emphasis was on killing and capturing enemy combatants rather than on engaging the population. In particular, Americans and Soviets employed massed artillery and aerial firepower with the intent to defeat enemy forces by attriting them to a point of collapse, an objective which was never reached."<sup>44</sup> What was achieved by the Soviets, however, was the alienation of the Afghan populace from the Communist Afghan government, thus provided the *Mujahideen* with a continually-expanding recruitment base, just as the collateral damage now being incurred by coalition conventional air strikes in Afghanistan is doing for the Taliban.<sup>45</sup>

The application of overwhelming firepower, while practical for many reasons in a conventional war, is increasingly recognized as counterproductive in a COIN environment, as the assessment above suggests. This view was recently reinforced by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, explaining that "it really does set us back" when military operations claim civilian lives.<sup>46</sup> These kinds of casualties are becoming ever more common in Afghanistan due to an increasing reliance on the use of overwhelming firepower when combating insurgents in populated areas. Illustrating this trend is a troubling statistic: As the number of US air strikes doubled from 2006 to 2007, the number of accidental civilian deaths *more* than doubled, from 116 to 321. In the following year, 2008, that figure rose to an alarming 828 civilian deaths attributed to pro-government forces, with 64 percent of those deaths (530



total) attributed to air strikes.<sup>47</sup> A majority of the 2008 civilian deaths occurred in the provinces of southern Afghanistan, where troop presence is the thinnest, Taliban activity is the greatest, and therefore heavy firepower is relied upon as a means of economy-of-force.<sup>48</sup>

In southern Afghanistan – the heart of the Taliban insurgency – 22,000 American, British, Canadian and Dutch soldiers have been waging an uphill battle for the past several years to secure the six provinces that encompass 78,000 square miles and a civilian population of 3.2 million – a ratio of roughly one counterinsurgent for every 150 inhabitants.<sup>49</sup> What this means for those troops who have been fighting in southern Afghanistan (and for the few thousand more who will soon be fighting there) is that US airpower will continue to be used as an economy-of-force measure, using technology and firepower to make up for shortages in precious manpower. As explained above, however, this use of heavy firepower has been corroding Afghan popular support for counterinsurgent forces for quite some time. If this trend is not reversed by putting *enough* dedicated counterinsurgent troops into Afghanistan to meet acceptable force ratios (we are currently short by a factor of three)<sup>50</sup> and therefore cut down on our reliance upon firepower to make up for these egregious manpower deficiencies, we will continue to make enemies of the civilian populace while Taliban insurgents will continue to fill the huge gaps that exist between pockets of counterinsurgent forces, gaining ever-greater degrees of initiative and influence, and ultimately causing our defeat for lack of popular support.<sup>51</sup>

## PROTECTING THE FORCE BY 'FOB'

*"Bagram has a Pizza Hut, a Burger King and even a massage parlor. But it's not the way to win a counterinsurgency."*<sup>52</sup>

- Dan Ephron

As one reporter recently explained in regard to the relationship between insurgent and counterinsurgent forces in southern Afghanistan, "The Taliban are everywhere the soldiers are

not.”<sup>53</sup> The pockets of counterinsurgent forces mentioned above that *have* been established in Afghanistan consist of either forward operating bases (FOBs) or combat outposts (COPs). FOBs, an icon of the Iraq war, have proven detrimental to the prosecution of a COIN campaign, in that they provide counterinsurgent troops with the ability to patrol within their areas of operation while living apart from the civilian populace, the counterinsurgent’s center of gravity.<sup>54</sup> It is for this reason that our forces in Iraq shifted tactics in 2006-07 in an effort to regain the trust of the populace and wrest initiative from Iraqi insurgents. This shift in tactics was expressed principally through the employment of COPs – as the primary means of deploying troops amongst the populace – and has ultimately set the foundation of our success in Iraq.

To properly frame a discussion on FOBs and COPs, it is first necessary to explain the distinction between the two. A FOB is a term generally applied to an operational combat base housing a battalion-size or larger unit, and intended primarily as a logistical and support base, but which also affords a degree of relative safety from enemy attack. A COP, on the other hand, typically houses company-, platoon-, or sometimes squad-size units, and serves as the base of tactical operations for that unit. Due to the purpose of COPs, they are typically deployed forward within a parent unit’s area of operations and are therefore more prone to serious enemy attack than a FOB.

While the benefits of FOBs in regard to troop comfort and welfare are beyond doubt,<sup>55</sup> the physical and resultant psychological separation that FOBs create between troops and the populace cannot help but subvert mission accomplishment by not only preventing the ‘persistent presence’ necessary to gain the trust of the populace, but also by creating a psychological disconnect in the mind of the troops – separating them mentally from the reality of their operational environment. Though some degree of psychological reprieve is needed from time to

time in order to combat the corrosive effects of combat stress, this separation most assuredly distracts the average soldier from focusing his mind – and therefore his efforts – on the people he is there to protect. It instead sets conditions that allow him to focus his mental energies on merely doing the minimal amount necessary to make it through a mission so that he can return safely to the FOB, where he can once again enjoy the psychological insulation from reality (notwithstanding the occasional enemy indirect fire attack) that the FOB provides.

In the author's experience, this phenomena results in an overall failure of troops to properly empathize with the populace and thus appreciate the true nature of their day-to-day reality. Indeed, our own COIN doctrine deliberately points out that "concentration of military forces in large bases for protection" is a known 'unsuccessful practice' of counterinsurgency.<sup>56</sup> The pitfalls of the FOB concept are not a contemporary issue. The FOB concept itself can be traced back to Vietnam (though the term 'FOB' was not used then), in which it fostered a "manpower distribution problem,"<sup>57</sup> which Andrew Krepinevich alludes to:

"Of the 543,000 men that the United States had in Vietnam in 1968 only 80,000 were actually combat troops. The rest were engaged in supply and service tasks, involving primarily the provision of firepower and creature comforts to Army personnel stationed in Vietnam. One can only guess at the number of effectives the Army could have put in the field had it emphasized the light infantry war in lieu of its big-unit war."<sup>58</sup>

According to Thomas Johnson, a Naval Postgraduate School research professor and Afghanistan expert, the FOB-induced manpower distribution problem is once again haunting US forces, this time in Afghanistan:

"I believe the problem in Afghanistan isn't necessarily a quantitative manpower problem but rather a manpower distribution problem. We have between 60,000 and 70,000 international troops in Afghanistan presently and the vast majority of these spend their time in the FOBs [forward operating bases]. We have at least 10,000 Soldiers, airmen, Marines and the like in Bagram for example, which is at least 150 miles away from the insurgency. And Bagram has a Pizza Hut, a Burger King and even a massage parlor. But it's not the way to win a counterinsurgency. You have to be out in the villages ... When I was in Solerno last year, which is a FOB near the Pakistani-Afghan border near Khost, I estimated—and nobody really argued with me—that while there were thousands of people at this base, probably less than 5 percent ever left the wire. And you just can't prosecute a counterinsurgency with those kinds of numbers."<sup>59</sup>

In addition to the use of FOBs in Afghanistan, with their accompanying drawbacks, US forces have employed COPs there extensively, due to the necessities of geography and the rural distribution of the populace and the enemy. This increased emphasis on COPs entails a much greater degree of risk than the US military proved capable of assuming at the outset of the Iraq war.<sup>60</sup> However, we have come a long way since then, and lessons from the Iraq troop surge prove that we have *begun* to adopt a more unconventional mindset, at least in regards to forward deployment of troops, that may prove to be a foundation for success in Afghanistan. This mindset is predicated on understanding the line between troop welfare and mission accomplishment – a line that has been blurred, to our detriment, by force-protection fetishism.

#### **LESSON FROM 'THE SURGE': '*CLEAR-HOLD-BUILD*' WORKS**

*"We got down at the people level and are staying."*<sup>61</sup>

- Gen. David Petraeus

The US is shifting its COIN strategy in Afghanistan, in what appears to be an application of the lessons learned from Marine successes in Iraq's western Al Anbar province<sup>62</sup> and Army successes in Iraq during the Army's 2007-08 troop surge.<sup>63</sup> This change in approach is predicated on the idea of 'persistent presence', achieved by deploying troops permanently at combat outposts within cities, towns and villages in an effort to not only demonstrate commitment and a willingness to share danger with the populace, but in doing so to gain the trust of the populace and the intelligence that comes with it. In evaluating the reasons for success of the surge in Iraq, both Petraeus' second-in-command, Peter Mansoor, and renowned counterinsurgency expert David Kilcullen attribute the primary reason for the surge's success to be the US military's shift to the *population-centric* tactics of the *clear-hold-build* concept that has now been doctrinalized in the FM 3-24.<sup>64</sup> These population-centric tactics are a significant

shift from the conventional, enemy-centric tactics that rely on firepower and attrition as the primary means of influencing the enemy.

Marines first deployed troops in combat outposts in Iraq in a deliberate effort to take the initiative away from insurgents in October 2005 during OPERATION IRON FIST in Sa'dah, and in the follow-up OPERATION STEEL CURTAIN in the towns of Karabilah, Husaybah, and Ubaydi, nestled along the Euphrates River in the Al Qa'im region of far western Al Anbar province. During these operations, two Marine infantry battalions, with two other coalition battalions and one Iraqi army battalion in support, cleared insurgents successively from all four towns, emplacing platoon-size combat outposts as the operations progressed, establishing a permanent presence in the towns and thus preventing their use by elements of Al Qaeda in Iraq.<sup>65, 66</sup> The eventual success of these operations in pacifying the Al Qa'im region proved the viability of the *clear-hold-build* concept that would be published in the Counterinsurgency Field Manual in 2006 and put to the test during General Petraeus's Iraq troop surge of 2007-2008.<sup>67</sup>

Probably the most daunting challenge for the new COIN doctrine during the surge was in Baghdad's Sadr City, where the *clear-hold-build* concept was applied. Explains General Petraeus in an interview with retired Army officer Gordon Cucullu:

What tactics are working? "We got down at the people level and are staying," Petraeus said flatly. "Once the people know we are going to be around, then all kinds of things start to happen... We're clearing it neighborhood by neighborhood." Troops move in... and stay. They are not transiting back to large, remote bases but are now living with the people they have come to protect. The results, Petraeus says, have been "dramatic."<sup>68</sup>

In assessing the benefits of the COP-centric (vice FOB-centric) approach, a February 2007 news article sums it up succinctly: "Petraeus's plan for retaking control of Baghdad puts American forces at greater risk of attack than when they were stationed in large bases on the periphery, but the crackdown has sharply reduced the number of civilian deaths in the capital."<sup>69</sup> This captures

the essence of both the near-term risk and long-term payoff inherent in the employment of COPs in support of a population-centric *clear-hold-build* strategy.

Concerning the concepts of near-term risk and long-term gain inherent in the shift to a *clear-hold-build* strategy, it is useful to examine casualty statistics as a measure of violence, and therefore, relative success. Total US casualties during the surge (01 Feb 2007 to 19 Jul 2008) were 1,040, equivalent to an average of just over two per day during that 18-month period.<sup>70</sup> In contrast, the average daily US casualties in Iraq during the past seven months of post-surge operations have dropped in half, down to .6 per day, which equates to a 72% decrease in casualties when compared to the entire pre-surge period in Iraq.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, the civilian casualty count has decreased 80% so far in 2009 (a 62% decrease, when 2008's figures are included with 2009's), when compared to the first five years of the Iraq war.<sup>72</sup> Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) casualties in the sixty-five months up to and including the surge totaled an average of 130 per month. In the seven months since the surge, this number has dropped to an average of 59 per month, a better than 50% decrease.<sup>73</sup> This is a significant decrease in overall violence in Iraq, and though not entirely attributable to the adoption of the *clear-hold-build* concept formally adopted during the surge, it does support claims that the change in US strategy (of which *clear-hold-build* is a significant component) has helped decrease the level of violence in Iraq, and has therefore contributed significantly to mission accomplishment.<sup>74</sup>

Does the success of the *clear-hold-build* concept in Iraq hold the same prospects for success in Afghanistan? Yes. Because with 77% of Afghanistan's population dispersed in the rural areas, it stands to reason that the primary means of providing security for the populace must be through widespread employment of COPs, especially given the current plan to deploy 17,000 additional troops this Spring in order to establish the foundations for *clear-hold-build* in

Afghanistan's southern provinces.<sup>75, 76</sup> In fact, a 2008 paper from the Joint Forces Staff College on the issue of a troop surge in Afghanistan – based on the premise that although the methods of counterinsurgency may change, the principles stay the same – points out that additional troops deployed to Afghanistan would still be focused on accomplishing “the same primary goals as the surge in Iraq,” namely establishing persistent presence, denying safe havens to the Taliban, and bolstering Afghan security forces. It further asserts that rural security must be the main effort of any Afghan surge, to be accomplished at the district level through US and NATO forces living within villages amongst the Pashtun populace.<sup>77</sup> General theory aside, though, the prospects for success of an Afghan troop surge are clearly predicated on the deployment of enough counterinsurgent troops to accomplish these goals. Given the vast size of southern Afghanistan, its predominantly rural nature, and the prevalence of Taliban throughout the area, the number of troops required will logically be greater than the five brigades committed to the Iraq troop surge.

## CONCLUSION: ‘*EMBRACE RISK*’

*“Risk is inherent in war and is involved in every mission.”*<sup>78</sup>

- MCDP-1 Warfighting

It has been argued that Soldiers are obligated, short of certain mission failure, to take risks.<sup>79</sup> If we as service members have “voluntarily given up our right not be harmed,”<sup>80</sup> then it stands to reason that we should therefore be expected to assume greater risks in pursuing mission accomplishment; and in a COIN environment, this means protecting the civilian populace. Indeed, this idea is espoused in our doctrine, which mandates that combatants should not only minimize harm to noncombatants, but should also “make positive commitments to assume additional risk to minimize *potential* harm” [emphasis added].<sup>81</sup> This is a clear-cut imperative

for our forces to '*embrace the risk*' inherent in COIN operations, for the very cornerstone of these operations is protecting the populace.<sup>82</sup>

Given the imperative to *embrace risk* in our current and upcoming COIN operations in Afghanistan, we must be mindful of several things: First, we must understand that attempts to armorize our force against all potential enemy threats not only accelerates the *Armor vs. IED* competition, but also shifts the 'burden of risk' from a casualty-averse military force onto the populace. In doing so, we have lifted that burden from our own shoulders and placed it squarely upon those who do not possess the material resources to bear it – the civilian populace.

Next, our firepower-centric approach to active force-protection measures must undergo a fundamental shift if our armed forces are to prove adaptable to the unconventional nature of COIN operations. Though conventional US doctrine implicitly justifies the collateral damage associated with the liberal use of heavy firepower, our military leaders must embrace the unconventional view inherent in our new counterinsurgency doctrine which places the immediate, near-term cost of success (i.e. casualties) upon the shoulders of the Soldier and Marine executing COIN operations.<sup>83</sup> As one Marine Officer explains, "limited force in counterinsurgency actually improves force protection."<sup>84</sup> This is accomplished first and foremost by a counterinsurgent force focusing its actions on the security of the populace, rather than the physical security of its own personnel. This naturally entails a degree of risk, because moving about and engaging openly with the populace – *the sea within which the insurgent fish swims*<sup>85</sup> – is a dangerous business, especially in the early stages of an insurgency when the insurgents hold sway over the populace. However; we cannot afford to lose the support of that populace by producing high numbers of civilian casualties that naturally accompany the application of excessive firepower.



Finally, while numbers of support troops will still need to be based in larger FOBs, the majority of active counterinsurgent forces should be stationed in COPs in order to establish *shared risk* and *persistent presence* amongst the populace, conditions that are central to a successful COIN strategy. *Clear-hold-build* operations rely not on armor and firepower, but rather on large numbers of dismounted troops, and are predicated upon a willingness of commanders to *embrace risk* in the employment of their forces. Assuming near-term risk is actually making a long-term investment in security, and thus, force protection.<sup>87</sup>

We must be ever vigilant as we surge forces into Afghanistan to not confuse near-term tactical imperatives with long-term goals.<sup>88</sup> In other words, in implementing our COIN doctrine in Afghanistan, we need to ensure that we do not repeat the mistakes of the past, namely confusing ‘troop welfare’ for mission accomplishment. COIN operations bring with them certain paradoxes unique to their unconventional operating environment; chief amongst these is the maxim: “*The more you protect your force, the less secure you are.*”<sup>89</sup> This means that, from the highest political leaders who establish our strategic objectives, to the lowest riflemen who establish security for the populace, we must be willing to accept the risks that come with these responsibilities. We must be keenly aware of the connections between tactical actions, operational objectives, and strategic goals, ensuring at all times that the three are in concert. When our tactical actions – based upon misguided preconceptions about the near-term imperatives of ‘force protection’ – do not support our long-term strategic goals, we must have the perspective to recognize, and the courage to admit, that we are failing in our mission.

As with any military effort – whether conventional or unconventional – success ultimately goes to the side which proves most *adaptable* to the changing conditions of the conflict, and it is precisely a *failure to adapt* which is most hazardous to our prospects for long-

term success in COIN. We are headed in the right direction in Afghanistan with our *clear-hold-build* doctrine and its requisite employment of COPs in order to establish *shared risk* and *persistent presence* with the populace. However, we have much work to do in our discretionary use of force and we need to be cognizant of both the escalating effects of the *Armor vs. IED* competition and the separation from the populace that armorizing brings. Both of these will require a deliberate and sustained effort to overcome our institutional mindset toward conventional notions of force protection.

We must keep in mind that our misguided preconceptions about force protection are the product of a conventional military mindset, and that the American public is *not* casualty averse, provided that their military is making progress toward success in an endeavor of national interest. This fact is of immediate and pressing concern to our nation's leaders, both civilian and military. The American Military must transform its conventional mindset, discard its misperceptions of America's casualty aversion, and purge its collective conscience of force-protection fetishism in order to meet the realities and paradoxes of counterinsurgency.

To succeed in Afghanistan, our military leaders at all levels must have the fortitude necessary to embrace the near-term risks involved in implementing sound counterinsurgency doctrine and accept the inevitable increase in casualties that will accompany the assumption of greater risk. Those near-term casualties, however, will eventually translate into long-term security, for both our forces and the Afghan populace. Long-term security will, in turn, ultimately translate into mission accomplishment and thus fewer overall casualties, both friendly and civilian. In short, we need to embrace the tactical risks necessary for operational and strategic success. It is time to put our money where our mouth is, steel ourselves for the casualties that may occur in the near-term, and get on with winning this fight.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce A. Gandy, "Force Protection and Mission Accomplishment," *Marine Corps Gazette* 83, no. 11 (Nov 1999): 44.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Record, "Force-Protection Fetishism Sources, Consequences, and (?) Solutions," *Aerospace Power Journal* (Summer 2000): 9, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

<sup>3</sup> "Military Casualty Information," *DoD Personnel & Procurement Statistics* website, updated January 20, 2009, <http://siadapp.dmdc.osd.mil/personnel/CASUALTY/castop.htm> (accessed January 20, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Department of the Army, *The U.S. Army & Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual: U.S. Army Field Manual No. 3-24: Marine Corps Warfighting Publication No 3-33.5* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007) 46. Annotated hereafter as: "FM 3-24".

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, x.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 1-02: Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington D.C.: Joint Staff, Pentagon): 214. The full doctrinal definition of force protection is as follows: Actions taken to prevent or mitigate hostile actions against DOD personnel, resources, facilities and critical information. These actions conserve the force's fighting potential so it can be applied at the decisive time and place, and incorporate the coordinated and synchronized offensive and defensive measures to enable the effective employment of the joint force while degrading opportunities for the enemy. Force protection does not include actions to defeat the enemy or protect against accidents, weather, or disease. Reducing the probability and minimizing the effects of enemy action on personnel, equipment, and critical facilities can accomplish force protection.

<sup>7</sup> Yochi J. Dreazen, "U.S. Strategy in Afghan War Hinges on Far-Flung Outposts," *Wall Street Journal*, March 5, 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123611818947423107.html> (accessed March 29, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> This argument is spelled out in the subsequent sections of this paper. Overall, the US military's exorbitant use of heavy firepower, relative lack of employment of combat outposts, and concentration of the majority of its forces in Bagram & Kabul all contribute to this trend. This organizational/institutional predilection toward conventional operations also predominated our initial COIN efforts in Iraq, as explained by Donald Hafner in "Counterinsurgency: Tentative Lessons from Iraq," *Boston College Center for Human Rights and International Justice*, 2005. <http://escholarship.bc.edu/hrij/facp/1> If we wish to learn from the lessons of our past, then we must take these lessons from Iraq concerning the dangers of a conventional mindset and apply them to Afghanistan.

<sup>9</sup> Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007): 19.

<sup>10</sup> The works researched by the author on the topic of American casualty aversion are as follows:

Karl W. Eikenberry, "Take no Casualties," *Parameters* (Summer 1996): 109-118, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, "Casualty Sensitivity and the War in Iraq," *Duke University*, [http://74.125.95.132/search?q=cache:E-VfzJ\\_uJzMJ:www.duke.edu/~gelpi/iraq.casualties.pdf+casualty+sensitivity+and+the+war+in+iraq&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=1&gl=us&client=firefox-a](http://74.125.95.132/search?q=cache:E-VfzJ_uJzMJ:www.duke.edu/~gelpi/iraq.casualties.pdf+casualty+sensitivity+and+the+war+in+iraq&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=1&gl=us&client=firefox-a) (accessed January 26, 2009).

Charles K Hyde, "Casualty Aversion: Implications for Policy Makers and Senior Military Officers," *Aerospace Power Journal* (Summer 2000): 17-27, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

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Dan Lindley, "U.S. Casualty Intolerance: A Dangerous Myth," *Chicago Sun Times*, October 26, 2001, <http://www.nd.edu/~dlindley/handouts/casualtyintolerance.html> (accessed January 26, 2009).

Jeffrey Record, "Collapsed Countries, Casualty Dread, and the New American Way of War," *Parameters* (Summer 2002): 4-23, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

Jeffrey Record, "Force-Protection Fetishism: Sources, Consequences, and (?) Solutions," *Aerospace Power Journal* (Summer 2000): 4-12, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

Jeffrey Record, "The American Way of War: Cultural Barriers to Successful Counterinsurgency," *CATO Institute*, Policy Analysis no. 577, (Sep 1, 2006): 1-19, [http://www.cato.org/pub\\_display.php?pub\\_id=6640](http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=6640) (accessed January 20, 2009).

Harvey M. Sapolsky and Jeremy Shapiro, "Casualties, Technology, and America's Future Wars," *Parameters* (Summer 1996): 119-27, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

Don Snider, John Nagl, and Tony Pfaff, "Army Professionalism, the Military Ethic, and Officership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *Strategic Studies Institute* (December 1999): 1-50.

<sup>11</sup> Hyde, 18-22.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 18-22.

<sup>14</sup> Lindley.

<sup>15</sup> Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler, 39-41.

<sup>16</sup> Snider, Nagl, and Pfaff, 14.

<sup>17</sup> Record, "Force-Protection Fetishism," 7.

<sup>18</sup> Hyde, 23.

<sup>19</sup> Record, "Force-Protection Fetishism," 5.

<sup>20</sup> FM 3-24, 48.

<sup>21</sup> Record, "Force-Protection Fetishism," 5.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> "Afghanistan," *PollingReport.com*, <http://www.pollingreport.com/afghan.htm> (accessed February 25, 2009).

<sup>24</sup> Hyde, 25.

<sup>25</sup> FM 3-24, 48.

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<sup>26</sup> Andrew Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986): 5.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 198.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>29</sup> "Troops in Contact: Airstrikes and Civilian Deaths in Afghanistan," *Human Rights Watch* (2008): 18-19, <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2008/09/08/troops-contact> (accessed February 25, 2009).

<sup>30</sup> Andrew Krepinevich and Dakota Wood, "Of IEDs and MRAPs: Force Protection in Complex Irregular Operations," *Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments* (October 17, 2007): 26, [http://www.csbaonline.org/4Publications/PubLibrary/S.20071017.Of IEDs and MRAPs/S.20071017.Of IEDs and MRAPs.pdf](http://www.csbaonline.org/4Publications/PubLibrary/S.20071017.Of%20IEDs%20and%20MRAPs/S.20071017.Of%20IEDs%20and%20MRAPs.pdf) (accessed January 20, 2009).

<sup>31</sup> Ted Moran, "The Evolution of Improvised Explosive Devices," *Terrorism Research Center* website, July 26, 2006, <http://www.terrorism.com/modules.php?op=modload&name=WarReports&file=index&view=1318> (accessed January 20, 2009).

<sup>32</sup> As 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 7<sup>th</sup> Marines (3/7) took over responsibility for Al Qa'im from the Army's 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment (1/3 ACR), the greatest enemy threat in the area (i.e. the thing that the soldiers of the mechanized battalion were most wary of) was a Chinese 62mm anti-tank rocket, which had been employed against their tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles on several occasions, from remotely-fired, improvised launchers. The rockets had damaged several tanks and Bradleys, and had injured a few soldiers. The 62mm rocket, therefore, had become the scourge of Al Qa'im. The Marines were understandably anxious about the existence of such a powerful threat, therefore, as we assumed control of Al Qa'im. We possessed no armored vehicles or tanks, and only a handful of up-armored HMMWVs, which 1/3 ACR had so mercifully left us. On the morning that the last of 1/3 ACR's soldiers departed Al Qa'im, the B Troop commander looked down at me from the relative safety of his Bradley and, eyeing the row of mostly un-armored HMMWVs which would be my company's only means of mobility for the next seven months, said to me respectfully, "Good luck, man. I don't know how you're gonna do it." However, within weeks of beginning operations in Al Qa'im, the dreaded 62mm rocket had all but disappeared from the insurgents' repertoire. They had found that 155mm IEDs and anti-tank mines were plenty effective against our HMMWVs and dismounted infantry, so they had adjusted their techniques accordingly, employing the requisite degree of force necessary to inflict casualties on their enemies.

In May 2004 a company of light-armored infantry, mounted in Marine Light Armored Vehicles (LAVs), began operating in our battalion's battlespace, on the north side of the Euphrates River, which we could not properly cover with our battalion's organic assets. The introduction of the LAV presented a new challenge for the insurgents in Al Qa'im, as it was better armored and therefore more resistant to IEDs than our HMMWVs were, and also offered more protection against anti-tank mines due to its v-shaped hull. The insurgents therefore first attempted to employ larger road-side IEDs, consisting of multiple 155mm artillery projectiles, but enjoyed only limited success in producing casualties. Eventually, though, three months after the LAV's arrival in Al Qa'im, the insurgents' patience and innovation paid off – a 13-ton LAV was flipped upside down by means of a massive IED buried beneath a dirt road, instantly killing two Marines and wounding the rest of the vehicle's crew.

<sup>33</sup> On August 3, 2005 an IED detonated beneath an AAV during a combat operation, flipping the 26-ton vehicle upside down and killing the fourteen Marines and one Iraqi translator inside. The significant loss of life in this example (unusual for a single incident) further illustrates the COIN paradox of "*The more you protect your force, the less secure you are.*" The implication that this paradox holds for American forces in a COIN environment in regards to armorizing their forces is controversial, yet self-evident: Evolution in warfare is driven by competition. We should be careful that we do not escalate this competition to the point that we further magnify the already-present risk to our force. Our insurgent enemies are extremely perceptive, innovative, capable, and patient. We can pay now, or we can pay later, but sooner or later we are going to pay. This question, then, must be deliberately addressed as we continue in what promises to be a long COIN effort in Afghanistan: What price is near-term risk mitigation going to exact from us in the long run? Force protection has its price, if not properly managed in COIN.

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<sup>34</sup> Peter Eisler, "The Truck the Pentagon Wants and the Firm that Makes it," *USA Today*, October 2, 2007, [http://www.usatoday.com/news/military/2007-08-01-force-protection-mraps\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/military/2007-08-01-force-protection-mraps_N.htm) (accessed January 23, 2009).

<sup>35</sup> Reference: After-Action Report, BLT 1/6, 24<sup>th</sup> MEU, 25 Sep 08 (pp. 91-92). Additionally, BLT 1/6's AAR complained of the extra weight and resultant loss of mobility incurred by add-on armor kits and Improved Thermal Sight System (ITSS) turrets for their LAV-A2s, explaining that though they "...brought increased force protection and capabilities to the [LAV] platoon, the additional 10,000 pounds of weight degraded the platoon's off-road capability... Additional protection comes at a cost."

Among the most pertinent criticisms of the MRAP's tactical application to a COIN environment are its size and weight, which significantly reduce its mobility in austere environments. As the MRAP was designed for use on improved-surface roads, its employment in Afghanistan has proven less than ideal. Upon returning from Afghanistan BLT 1/6, though praising the MRAP's protective qualities, criticized it for its lack of mobility and visibility, both of which are obviously hindrances to mission accomplishment in the COIN environment of Afghanistan.

<sup>36</sup> For an excellent review of the advantages and disadvantages of the MRAP issue, see the PowerPoint report entitled "Of IEDs and MRAPs: Force Protection In Complex Irregular Operations" by Andrew Krepinevich and Dakota Wood, delivered to the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments on October 17, 2007 at: [http://www.csbaonline.org/4Publications/PubLibrary/S.20071017.Of\\_IEDs\\_and\\_MRAPs/S.20071017.Of\\_IEDs\\_and\\_MRAPs.pdf](http://www.csbaonline.org/4Publications/PubLibrary/S.20071017.Of_IEDs_and_MRAPs/S.20071017.Of_IEDs_and_MRAPs.pdf)

<sup>37</sup> Defense Science Board Task Force on Force Protection in Urban and Unconventional Environments, *Report to the Secretary of Defense*, March 2006, 40, [www.acq.osd.mil/dsb/reports/2006-03-Force\\_Protection\\_Final.pdf](http://www.acq.osd.mil/dsb/reports/2006-03-Force_Protection_Final.pdf) (accessed February 26, 2009).

<sup>38</sup> Krepinevich and Wood, 26.

<sup>39</sup> Elliot Cohen, Jan Horvath, and John Nagl, "Principles, Imperatives, and Paradoxes of Counterinsurgency," *Military Review* (March-April 2006): 53, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

<sup>40</sup> Krepinevich, 6.

<sup>41</sup> Shaun Waterman, "Analysis: Afghan Civilian Toll Hurts U.S.," *Middle East Times*, February 23, 2009, [http://www.metimes.com/Security/2009/02/23/analysis\\_afghan\\_civilian\\_toll\\_hurts\\_us/fae7/](http://www.metimes.com/Security/2009/02/23/analysis_afghan_civilian_toll_hurts_us/fae7/) (accessed February 25, 2009).

<sup>42</sup> Krepinevich, 4-5.

<sup>43</sup> Robert Cassidy, "Back to the Street Without Joy: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Vietnam and Other Small Wars," *Parameters*, (Summer 2004): 75-79, [www.carlisle.army.mil/USAWC/Parameters/04summer/cassidy.pdf](http://www.carlisle.army.mil/USAWC/Parameters/04summer/cassidy.pdf) (accessed February 25, 2009).

<sup>44</sup> Kalev I. Sepp, "Best Practices in Counterinsurgency," *Military Review* (May-June 2005): 11, [www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/milreview/sepp.pdf](http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/milreview/sepp.pdf) (accessed January 26, 2009).

<sup>45</sup> Stephen Kinzer, "The Reality of War in Afghanistan," *Boston Globe*, October 15, 2008, [http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial\\_opinion/oped/articles/2008/10/15/the\\_reality\\_of\\_war\\_in\\_afghanistan/](http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2008/10/15/the_reality_of_war_in_afghanistan/) (accessed January 20, 2009).

Writes Kinzer: "A relentless series of US attacks in Afghanistan has produced "collateral damage" in the form of hundreds of civilian deaths, which alienate the very Afghans the West needs. As long as the campaign continues, recruits will pour into Taliban ranks. It is no accident that the Taliban has mushroomed since the current bombing campaign began. It allows the Taliban to claim the mantle of resistance to a foreign occupier. In Afghanistan, there is none more sacred."

<sup>46</sup> Associated Press, "Afghan Civilian Deaths: A Rising Toll," *Time.com*, September 4, 2008, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1838778,00.html?iid=chix-sphere> (accessed February 25, 2009). This quote is taken from a statement issued by Admiral Mullen in response to a 22 August 2008 American air strike against the Afghan village of Azizabad in which the Afghan government and the United Nations claim between 76 and 90 civilians were killed, including 60 children.

<sup>47</sup> "Number of Afghan Civilian Deaths in 2008 Highest since Taliban Ouster, Says UN," *United Nations* website, February 17, 2009, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=29918&Cr=Afghan&Cr1=civilian+rights&Kw1=civilian+casualties&Kw2=afghanistan&Kw3=> (accessed February 25, 2009); "Number of Afghan Civilian Deaths in 2008 Highest since Taliban Ouster, says UN," *UN News*, February 17, 2009, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=29918&Cr=Afghan&Cr1=civilian+rights&Kw1=afghanistan+&Kw2=&Kw3=> (accessed February 25, 2009); Mark Thompson, "Afghan Civilian Deaths: A Rising Toll," *Time.com*, September 4, 2008, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1838778,00.html> (accessed February 25, 2009); "Troops in Contact: Airstrikes and Civilian Deaths in Afghanistan," *Human Rights Watch* (2008): 18-19, <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2008/09/08/troops-contact> (accessed February 25, 2009).

2008 was thus responsible for the highest civilian casualty count of any year since the ouster of the Taliban regime at the end of 2001. The number of Afghan civilian casualties in 2008 – at total of 2,118 – is the highest recorded since the ouster of the Taliban in 2001. The number of those killed last year represents an almost 40 per cent increase over 2007, when 1,523 people lost their lives due to conflict, according to a report prepared by the Human Rights Unit of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). Of the 2,118 casualties reported between 1 January and 31 December 2008, 55 per cent of them – or 1,160 deaths – were attributed to anti-government elements and 39 per cent – 828 deaths – to pro-government forces. As U.S. air strikes doubled from 2006 to 2007, the number of accidental civilian deaths soared, from 116 to 321, according to Marc Garlasco, a former Pentagon targeting chief who tabulates civilian casualties for Human Rights Watch (HRW), an independent research group. Illustrating this disturbing trend is an example of the kind of incident in which heavy firepower is being used with the *intent* of minimizing friendly casualties, but has the *effect* of producing inordinate civilian casualties: On the night of May 8, 2007, in which at least 21 Afghan civilians were killed during ISAF air strikes on the village of Lwar Malazi, Sangin district, Helmand province, following a Taliban attack on members of 1st Kandak, 1st Brigade, 209th Afghan National Army Corps, being advised by U.S. Special Forces.

<sup>48</sup> "Number of Afghan Civilian Deaths in 2008 Highest since Taliban Ouster, says UN," *UN News*, February 17, 2009, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=29918&Cr=Afghan&Cr1=civilian+rights&Kw1=afghanistan+&Kw2=&Kw3=> (accessed February 25, 2009); Dexter Filkins, "Taliban Fill NATO's Big Gaps in Afghan South," *New York Times.com*, January 21, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/22/world/asia/22taliban.html?fta=y> (accessed February 26, 2009); Robert Downey, Lee Grubbs, Brian Malloy, and Craig Wonson, "How Should the U.S. Execute a Surge in Afghanistan?" *Small Wars Journal*, p. 6, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2008/11/how-should-the-us-execute-a-su/> (accessed February 28, 2009); Julian Barnes and Greg Miller, "Obama Orders More Troops to Afghanistan," February 18, 2009, <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-afghan-troops18-2009feb18.0.1590275.story> (accessed February 26, 2009); Shaun Waterman, "Analysis: Afghan Civilian Toll Hurts U.S.," *Middle East Times*, February 23, 2009, [http://www.metimes.com/Security/2009/02/23/analysis\\_afghan\\_civilian\\_toll\\_hurts\\_us/fae7/](http://www.metimes.com/Security/2009/02/23/analysis_afghan_civilian_toll_hurts_us/fae7/) (accessed February 25, 2009).

Further illustrating the alienation that the use of firepower is having on the Afghan populace are the results of a recent poll (across all 34 Afghan provinces), which shows that 77% of Afghans feel that collateral damage incurred through the employment of air strikes is unacceptable, regardless of whether or not the Taliban are fighting from the vicinity of civilians. Thus our firepower-centric force-protection measures in Afghanistan are alienating the populace, and if not actually making more insurgents, certainly giving the populace reason to passively cooperate with the Taliban out of animosity for US, NATO, and Afghan Army forces due to the disproportionate degree of firepower (with its resultant collateral damage) that they bring to the battlefield. This has the potential effect of not only doubling our workload, but also extending the duration of our counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan, and this, clearly, is not conducive to force protection.

<sup>49</sup> "ISAF Troops in Numbers (Placemat)," *NATO ISAF* website, February 13, 2009, <http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/epub/pdf/placemat.html> (accessed February 28, 2009). Currently, a total of 56,000 US and NATO forces

are deployed in Afghanistan, with an additional 79,000 Afghan National Army (ANA) and 76,000 Afghan National Police (ANP), for a grand total of 211,000 troops/police. This, given an estimated total Afghan population of 32 million, produces a ratio of roughly 1:150 counterinsurgents-to-residents, which is short of the recommended ratio of 1:50 by a factor of 3, notwithstanding the fact that the majority of the US and NATO troops in this total are not actively engaged counterinsurgent troops, but rather support troops.

<sup>50</sup> Our COIN doctrine calls for a *minimum* ratio of 1:50 in the counterinsurgent-to-inhabitant ratio (FM 3-24, p. 23), yet the current troop levels in southern Afghanistan equate to a ratio of 1:145. However, this in itself is an optimal figure, presupposing that every troop is *actively* fulfilling a counterinsurgency role. This, unfortunately, is not the case, as the majority of these troops (as in any war, conventional or unconventional) are fulfilling a support role.

<sup>51</sup> Filkins.

<sup>52</sup> Dan Ephron, "Winning in Afghanistan: A Military Analyst on What's Wrong with U.S. Strategy," *Newsweek.com*, September 23, 2008, <http://www.newsweek.com/id/160439> (accessed February 25, 2009).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> FM 3-24, xxv.

<sup>55</sup> The psychological benefits of FOBs was documented in a study published in March 2006 for the Strategic Studies Institute, entitled "CU @ the FOB: How the Forward Operating Base is Changing the Life of Combat Soldiers," authored by Leonard Wong and Stephen Gerras, and available at: [www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdf/files/pub645.pdf](http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdf/files/pub645.pdf) (accessed February 25, 2009).

<sup>56</sup> FM 3-24, 51.

<sup>57</sup> Ephron.

<sup>58</sup> Krepinevich, 197-98.

<sup>59</sup> Ephron.

<sup>60</sup> At the outset of coalition operations in 2004 (Operation Iraqi Freedom II), the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division in western Al Anbar was reticent to establish even company-sized COPs within populated areas. The division's commanding general, MajGen James Mattis, cited "force protection" concerns when denying the author's request to deploy his rifle company permanently within his own company's area of operations in Karabilah and Sa'dah, Iraq. A year and a half later, it would later take 2,500 Marines from 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 6<sup>th</sup> Marines and 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Marines and other supporting coalition forces (as well as additional 1,000 Iraqi forces in support) to forcefully clear insurgents from Karabilah and Sa'dah. Operations Iron Fist and Steel Curtain, in October and November 2005, re-established coalition control over the area, to the tune of 40 US casualties (10 dead, 30 wounded) and 54 civilian killed. Had the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division established COPs in the Al Qa'im area to begin with, these firepower-centric, heavy-handed combat operations would most likely not have been necessary.

<sup>61</sup> Gordon Cucullu, "The Iraq Surge: Why it's Working..." *New York Post*, March 20, 2007, [http://www.nypost.com/seven/03202007/postopinion/opedcolumnists/why\\_its\\_working\\_opedcolumnists\\_gordon\\_cucullu.htm?page=0](http://www.nypost.com/seven/03202007/postopinion/opedcolumnists/why_its_working_opedcolumnists_gordon_cucullu.htm?page=0) (accessed February 25, 2009).

<sup>62</sup> "Operation Iron Fist (Kabda Bil Hadid)," *Global Security.org*, June 15, 2006, [http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/oif-iron-fist\\_2005.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/oif-iron-fist_2005.htm) (accessed February 28, 2009); "Operation Steel Curtain (Al Hajip Elfulathi)," *Global Security.org*, June 15, 2006, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/oif-steel-curtain.htm> (accessed February 28, 2009).



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<sup>63</sup> Mark Walker, "Military: Strategy Shift awaits Afghanistan-bound Troops," *North County Times*, February 13, 2009, <http://www.nctimes.com/articles/2009/02/13/military/z1b0cele32474155888257552007212e3.txt> (accessed February 23, 2009).

<sup>64</sup> Dave Dilegge, "Mansoor on The Surge," *Small Wars Journal*, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2008/08/mansoor-on-the-surge/> (accessed February 25, 2009).

<sup>65</sup> Bill Roggio, "Steel Curtain Unmasked," *The Long War Journal* (November 27, 2005) [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2005/11/steel\\_curtain\\_unmask.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2005/11/steel_curtain_unmask.php) (accessed March 1, 2009).

<sup>66</sup> "Operation Iron Fist" and "Operation Steel Curtain", *Global Security.org*.

<sup>67</sup> Ever since the success of the Iraq troop surge has become evident, a persistent question has come to the fore as the US now shifts its focus from Iraq to Afghanistan: "Which lessons from Iraq can be applied in Afghanistan?" One answer to this question certainly lies in what is arguably the most significant key to the success of the surge – namely, the adoption of the COIN tactic of 'clear-hold-build'. Due to the deterioration of the security situation in central Iraq in 2006, and in a bid to regain the initiative in what had become a failing Iraq COIN effort (successes in Al Anbar notwithstanding), General Petraeus implemented a 'surge' of combat forces in early 2007. This troop 'surge' was based upon the deployment of five additional combat brigades, mostly to the Baghdad area, which allowed counterinsurgent forces to expand security in key urban areas while enabling other COIN efforts to be deliberately implemented. The persistent presence established in those key urban areas enabled counterinsurgent forces there and elsewhere to convince the Iraqis of our commitment to their safety and therefore gain intelligence on insurgent networks and infrastructure, while deliberately targeting insurgents and Al Qa'eda terrorists, clearing insurgent safe havens in other parts of the country, and also to surge efforts to train and deploy additional indigenous Iraqi security forces. (Downey, et. al, 3-5). The 'surge' was therefore more than just the deployment of additional troops, it was a shift in counterinsurgent tactics enabled by the introduction of those additional troops. As General Petraeus' chief of staff during the first half of the surge, Colonel Peter Mansoor, explains: "...One must understand that the 'surge' was more than an infusion of reinforcements into Iraq. Of greater importance was the change in the way US forces were employed starting in February 2007, when Gen. David Petraeus ordered them to position themselves with Iraqi forces out in neighborhoods. This repositioning was based on newly published counterinsurgency doctrine that emphasized the protection of the population and recognized that the only way to secure people is to live among them..." (Dilegge.)

<sup>68</sup> Cucullu.

<sup>69</sup> Sarah Baxter, Marie Colvin and Hamoudi Saffar, "Surge Tactics to Tame Ramadi, City of Anarchy," *Times Online*, February 25, 2007, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/iraq/article1434544.ece> (accessed March 1, 2009).

<sup>70</sup> "Iraq Coalition Casualty Count," *iCasualties.org*, <http://icasualties.org/Iraq/index.aspx> (accessed February 25, 2009).

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> "Iraq Body Count," *Iraq Body Count.org*, <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/database/> (accessed February 25, 2009).

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<sup>73</sup> "Iraq Casualty Count."

<sup>74</sup> General David H. Petraeus, Commander, Multi-National Force–Iraq from February 2007 to September 2008, issued a report to Congress in April 2008 on the progress of the "Iraq surge." During this testimony he attributed coalition success in Iraq, in addition to the clear-hold-build tactics of the surge, to two other factors: the

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increase in troop numbers that made the surge tactics possible, and the “attitudinal shift” of the Sunni ‘Awakening.’ Reference: “Report to Congress on the Situation in Iraq,” 8-9 April 2008, 1-3, [www.mnf-iraq.com/images/stories/Press\\_briefings/2008/april/080408\\_petraeus\\_testimony.pdf](http://www.mnf-iraq.com/images/stories/Press_briefings/2008/april/080408_petraeus_testimony.pdf) (accessed February 25, 2009).

<sup>75</sup> MCIA Country Handbook, “Afghanistan,” *Marine Corps Intelligence Activity*, December 2007, 31.

<sup>76</sup> NBC News Service, “Obama OKs 17,000 Troops for Afghanistan,” *MSNBC*, February 17, 2009. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/29242187/> (accessed February 28, 2009).

<sup>77</sup> Downey, et. al, 5.

<sup>78</sup> Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, *Warfighting*, MCDP-1, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Marine Corps, 1997): 8. Webster’s dictionary defines *risk* as “exposure to the chance of injury or loss”, which, in the context of military operations, is really what this business is all about. The US military is in the business of taking risks – not gambles, but risks – in the conduct of our operations. The use of force always carries with it the willful assumption of a degree of risk. Where the military has gone wrong, though, is in an implicit belief that risk can be mitigated away by means of tactical force-protection measures (both physical and procedural). Tactical actions must *always* be in concert with our operational objectives and strategic goals – the three should be nested within each other. However, when we implement tactical force-protection measures that have adverse second-order operational and strategic effects, we have lost our perspective on what is most important in COIN operations. Casualty-averse force-protection measures isolate tactical actions from their higher purpose, and lives spent in the conduct of disjointed tactical actions that do not support operational objectives are lives squandered in isolation of our strategic goals – they are lives wasted.

<sup>79</sup> Don Snider, John Nagl, and Tony Pfaff, “Army Professionalism, The Military Ethic, and Officership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” *Strategic Studies Institute* (December 1999): 33.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>81</sup> FM 3-24, 241, 247-9.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, xxviii-xxix.

<sup>84</sup> Eric F. Swabb, “Restrictive Rules of Engagement and Force Protection: Resolving the Leadership Dilemma,” *Marine Corps Gazette* (October 2006): 38.

<sup>85</sup> David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 1964, 2006): vii.

<sup>87</sup> Assuming that risk, however, especially for a conventionally organized and oriented military force – characterized by a strong institutional culture with deeply ingrained conventional concepts of physical security (force protection) – is easier said than done. The first step in assuming such risk is acknowledging the nature of the conflicts (unconventional, vice conventional) in which we are engaged in Iraq and Afghanistan, as cautioned by Clausewitz: “The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.” Reference: Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976): 88.

<sup>88</sup> Greg Mills, “Ten Counterinsurgency Commandments from Afghanistan,” *Foreign Policy Research Institute* (January 14, 2009): 7, <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/200704.mills.afghanistancounterinsurgency.html> (accessed January 26, 2009).

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<sup>89</sup> Cohen, et. al., 52.

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