Just Cause Up Close: A Light Infantryman's View of LIC

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Participating in a low-intensity conflict creates a unique challenge for the soldier on the ground. Practice in limiting the force exerted to gain the defeat of an enemy is not a training task often encountered during field exercises. For those who have been at the cutting edge of a low-intensity conflict, constraints and limitations placed upon soldiers (rules of engagement) seem to be, at times, dangerous restraints which can place the lives of soldiers at risk. These rules are a translation of the policy objectives passed down to the Army from the National Command Authorities. As an illustration of how this translation occurs, consider a policy for the US presence in a foreign nation in which one aim is to avoid alienating the local populace. This might prompt the joint task force commander to issue a directive to his subordinates to avoid, at all costs, unnecessary civilian casualties or property damage during operations. This policy could eventually be translated to the soldier as an order not to chamber a round in his weapon unless he feels he is in imminent danger. The time it takes to chamber a round might well save the life of a civilian in a tense situation; but it also might cost the soldier his life because he was not prepared to return fire instantly.

My unit's participation in Operation Just Cause, the invasion of Panama in December 1989, gave me a personal perspective on such potential problems. As company commander of C Company, 2d Battalion, 9th Infantry, 7th Infantry Division (Light), it was my responsibility to enforce the rules of engagement for our operations and justify these limitations to the soldiers. This article briefly reviews the experiences of C Company in operating within the rules of engagement during Operation Just Cause and recommends some changes in the training of US Army units earmarked for low-intensity conflict. Such considerations are timely in view of present initiatives to revise current AirLand Battle doctrine.

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Operation Just Cause—A Transition of Ends and Means

The Panama invasion can be defined as a peacetime contingency operation ("short-term military activities—rescue missions, show-of-force operations, punitive strikes—taken in support of US foreign policy") at the low-intensity end of the conflict spectrum.[1] The most reliable and quoted figures available are that 23 American soldiers died and 324 were injured or wounded during the invasion which began in the early hours of 20 December 1989. The Catholic church reported that 655 Panamanians were killed and 2000 injured.[2] Some analysts pointed an accusing finger at the US Army after the invasion, arguing that the force used was excessive in relation to the threat encountered. Others claim that the operation was a near flawless intervention which proved the validity of the nation's low-intensity doctrine. Which view is more accurate? The activities of C Company in Panama may point to some answers.

C Company first deployed to Panama during Operation Nimrod Dancer in May 1989. The 2d Battalion, 9th Infantry, was part of the deployment force ordered by President George Bush to go to Panama in response to the violence-marred May elections. This experience was the company's first acquaintance with rules of engagement and peacetime contingency operations. C Company participated in the safeguarding of the Rodman ammunition depot near Panama City and protected American personnel at Coco Solo, an old US naval base and home to the Panama Defense Forces' naval infantry, on the Atlantic Ocean end of the Canal.

These actions forced the leadership in C Company to think in different terms than it was used to. Force was used only as a last resort in order to protect lives or government property. Soldiers trained to act as warriors with extreme violence were now constables and were to perform the unaccustomed function of maintaining order. Each soldier carried and learned verbatim information contained on a so-called "blue-card." One side of the blue card listed Spanish phrases essential for handling confrontations with Panamanian personnel. The other side listed the strict rules of engagement which were to govern the soldier's every act. The nearly three months of duty spent in Panama during Operation Nimrod Dancer were to greatly benefit the commissioned and noncommissioned officers of C Company. Many of the company's junior enlisted soldiers left the battalion in September 1989 as part

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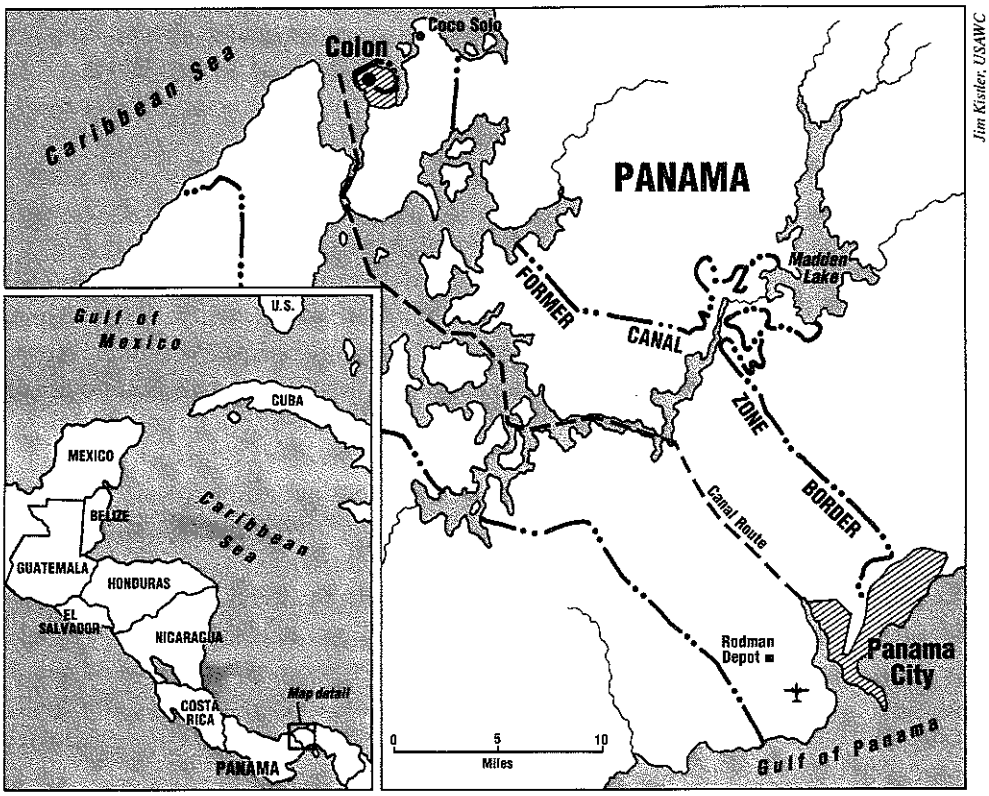

of a COHORT (**COH**esion, **O**perational **R**eadiness, and **T**raining) rotation.[3] However, the leadership in the company stayed essentially the same and served as a reservoir of information about the Panamanian Defense Force, rules of engagement, the culture of Panama, etc., which would stand the company in good stead during Operation Just Cause.

As the new COHORT group of soldiers arrived in October 1989, the training focus in the battalion, and indeed in the entire 9th Regiment, was on an upcoming National Training Center rotation in April 1990. The battalion commander (influenced no doubt by the directives of the regimental commander) insisted that all training be conducted in a mid- to high-intensity environment, a decision that most of the company commanders supported.[4] The battalion was completely focused on doing well during the NTC rotation. In retrospect, however, the training emphasis was shortsighted, as events would soon prove.

Activity in Panama started to increase with the attempted coup against General Manuel Noriega by Major Moises Giroldi on 3 October 1989. The attempt was not abetted by the United States. The arrival of the Noriega-loyal Battalion 2000 at the scene ended the coup, and Giroldi was executed. Two days before the coup attempt, General Maxwell Thurman had replaced General Fred F. Woerner as Commander of US Southern Command. The consensus on the ground was that President Bush wanted to initiate a more

aggressive policy vis-à-vis the Noriega regime, thus necessitating a command change in view of General Woerner's seeming reluctance to act. Before the invasion, General Thurman revamped the plans for intervention (Operation Blue Spoon) and waited for the order to execute them.

The killing of US Marine Lieutenant Roberto Paz on 16 December 1989, and the subsequent beating of a US Navy officer and his wife who witnessed the shooting of Paz, lit the fuse which led to intervention in the early morning hours of 20 December. The stated goals of the US intervention were to safeguard American citizens, capture Noriega, defend the Panama Canal from sabotage, and install as president the man the Panamanians had overwhelmingly voted for the previous May—Guillermo Endara.[5] Most Panamanians supported US military intervention if for no other reason than that it offered an opportunity to end the economic and political repression of the Noriega regime.[6]

The US ground force participating in the operation consisted of elements of the 75th Ranger Regiment, 82d Airborne Division, a battalion from the 5th Mechanized Infantry Division, 193d Infantry Brigade, the 7th Infantry Division (Light), and US Marines. The Army's light divisions are designed primarily for low-intensity conflict. Lightly equipped and ideally configured for rapid deployment, these divisions derive their combat multipliers from superior small-unit leader initiative, realistic training, soldier quality, battlefield skills, and physical conditioning.[7] As part of the 7th ID (Light), C Company was soon to be caught in the maelstrom of events in Panama.

C Company Deploys[8]

The 2d Battalion, 9th Infantry, completed a rigorous training phase of its new COHORT soldiers by 20 December 1989. Everything from rifle marksmanship at the home post of Fort Ord, California, to company force-on-force exercises conducted in the semi-arid environment of Fort Hunter-Liggett was compressed into a whirlwind two months of training. After spending weeks away from their families, the battalion's members looked forward to Christmas leave.

But on 20 December, all leaders on leave status were ordered to report to their companies. Although unsure whether it was going to Panama, the battalion prepared for a possible deployment. Just as C Company was headed out on a physical training run on 22 December, it received word to deploy. The battalion went to Travis Air Force Base in California and prepared to board aircraft. While the soldiers cleaned weapons and nervously watched updates on CNN in the departure terminal, the company commanders were notified that the probable area of operation would be Panama City.

C Company relieved an element of the 325th Infantry of the 82d Airborne Division in Panama City on Christmas Day. The company's area of operation was an upscale neighborhood near the financial district. C Company's

mission was to safeguard key facilities, find and capture members of Noriega's so-called "dignity" battalions (local militia), and restore order to the neighborhood. To accomplish these tasks, foot patrols were mounted day and night; roadblocks were placed on highways to check passengers and enforce nighttime curfews; vital facilities (e.g. food warehouses, banks, and schools) were occupied; guns were confiscated; and leads on wanted members of the Noriega regime were investigated. The rules of engagement allowed the local commander sufficient latitude to protect the soldiers and aggressively accomplish the mission.

The unit from the 82d Airborne which C Company relieved had had little time to search the entire neighborhood. C Company soldiers were therefore often the first Americans these Panamanians had seen since the invasion occurred. The reception given the US soldiers was reminiscent of that portrayed in newsreels of the liberation of France in the Second World War. People cheered from the windows, offered the soldiers food, and provided information about the location of dignity battalion members and arms caches, as well as other vital intelligence. The people, it seemed, had awakened from a long nightmare of intimidation and violence.

C Company was quite active during its first week in Panama. Many weapons were collected through a weapons-for-cash operation. Dignity battalion members were captured and processed, and suspicious sites were investigated. C Company's neighborhood included a Panamanian Defense Force G-2 headquarters, the publishing offices of the communist newspaper *Bayano*, and the homes of several Noriega protégés. Rules of engagement permitted unlimited access to all businesses and homes. Permission to enter structures was sought from the property owner, but if permission was not forthcoming, US soldiers could force their way inside. Soldiers carried weapons with rounds chambered. Leads on possible PDF and dignity battalion members were aggressively followed up. Several lessons were validated during this initial week. First, the experience of the officers and NCOs from the previous summer was absolutely critical, as many of our new soldiers were almost totally unfamiliar with Latin America and with military operations in urban terrain. Second, the combat experience of the first sergeant, the only Vietnam veteran in the company, was very important. He was a definite stabilizing influence. Third, the US Army had a great asset in its large number of Spanish-speaking soldiers. These soldiers were invaluable in providing a critical liaison with the local population.

After about a week, as the threat lessened, the mission became more directly constabulary in nature. And as C Company's mission changed, so did the rules of engagement. This change had to be articulated to the troops along with the rationale for it. This is an especially difficult task with younger soldiers. Their basic training and advanced infantry training (and, indeed, our

training to gear up for the NTC) was focused on applying maximum violence. Now the leadership was asking them to be measured in their actions and to play the role of constables. C Company's patrols, roadblocks, and curfew enforcement continued. However, every arrest of suspected PDF or dignity battalion members now had to be the result of two independently verified tips. Further, no home or business could be entered without the owner's permission unless soldiers were being fired upon from inside the structure. As a result of the lessened enemy activity and some unfortunate accidental discharges, rounds were no longer chambered unless a direct threat presented itself. These changes in the rules were justified. However, it is a leadership challenge to insure that a lessening of the threat and a tightening of the rules of engagement do not result in some soldiers dropping their guard or being less attentive.

One of C Company's more significant actions as a constabulary force during this second week was to seal off the home of the Peruvian Chargé d'Affaires. It was well known that several people on the so-called "black list" (people most wanted by the American and Panamanian authorities for their affiliations with the Noriega regime) had taken refuge inside.[9] Since a sister company in the battalion had been involved in the search of the Cuban Ambassador's home which resulted in a diplomatic incident, C Company's soldiers were reluctant to so much as touch the fence surrounding the property.

A key factor for C Company's success during the constabulary phase was the initiative shown by the leaders in the platoons. Perhaps two of the best reforms instituted by the Army in the last decade are those to encourage initiative at the lowest levels and to combat the "zero defects" mentality. For instance, one C Company platoon leader literally organized his own intelligence network through contacts he established in his area of operation. Not only was he better able to identify and arrest Noriega supporters, he was also able to protect those who supported Endara. He was trusted enough to be asked to provide security for the Panama City Council when it met.

Two problems affected C Company's operations during this phase. First, the decision of the US and Panamanian authorities to quickly release detainees caused great fear among the population. For example, there were cases in the C Company area in which dignity battalion members were fingered by their neighbors at great personal risk. US soldiers would arrest the dignity battalion members after verifying their membership and confiscating weapons and uniforms. These detainees were then sent back to the rear areas. Subsequently, perhaps less than a week later, they were released and back in the neighborhood threatening those who had tipped the American soldiers to their presence. Understandably, sources of intelligence quickly diminished.

Second, the arbitrary nature of unit boundaries in the urban environment caused problems. Many times C Company would receive information concerning people who were literally across the street but in another unit's

area of operation. Coordination would then be made through the battalion, and the unit with that particular area of responsibility would be tasked with investigating the report. With the large number of reports companies were handling, this additional report was often last priority. Consequently, many "bad guys" probably escaped scrutiny. This also caused frustration among the tipsters and reduced their enthusiasm for rendering support.

C Company's third week in Panama City signaled yet another change in the mission, with its soldiers becoming role models for their Panamanian counterparts. Gradually, the US Army began to transfer policing authority back to the Panamanians. Combined Panamanian/US patrols were conducted. Soldiers were instructed to conduct themselves in a manner beyond reproach,

7th Inf Div (Light) PAO

US soldiers were expected to be models of professionalism. Here, a 7th ID soldier works with his allied counterpart during the transfer of policing authority back to the Panamanians.

set high standards, and be models of professionalism and moral conduct. The acceptance of water and plates of food by soldiers was now forbidden. The Panamanian forces were notorious for their inclination to demand protection money from the populace. Now, US soldiers were expected to demonstrate through their actions that such corruption was not the norm. For the soldiers, it was difficult to understand how accepting a cup of water or a piece of fruit might be interpreted by their Panamanian companions as the green light to resume their strong-arm methods of extortion. Yet the US soldiers followed the new rule, even though it caused some perplexed looks on the part of the people whose well-meaning generosity they now refused.

Once again, as the goals changed, so did the rules of engagement. Command control and engagement rules were now very strict. Junior leaders had little latitude to conduct any operation without first getting approval from higher authority. Illustrating this tight control, squad-sized patrols were tracked by the regiment headquarters. What sense those at regiment made of following the movements of hundreds of different patrols in the area of operation escaped many of those at the bottom echelons who were forced to submit excruciatingly detailed reports. As the engagement rules and control tightened, the United States began to defer most of the peacekeeping operations to the Panamanians. The role for the 7th ID (Light) was ending.

C Company's departure from Panama on 18 January 1990 was bittersweet. Many in the company felt as though they were leaving a job only partly finished. Concerns about the future of the people of Panama gave way to satisfaction, however, in the face of a tremendous reception given the returning soldiers at Fort Ord, and in the realization that no one in the company had been killed or injured during the operation.

Reflections and Recommendations

How did the US Army do in Panama, and what might be done to better its performance in a future low-intensity conflict? In an article in *The Washington Post*, Edward Luttwak complimented the military leaders on the size of the force used and the plan. However, he criticized what he called an excessive use of firepower and a poor state of training demonstrated by the soldiers.[10] Were these criticisms valid? Based on this author's observations, definitely not.

- *The Soldiers.* In spite of the fact that the US soldiers had little experience in this conflict environment, they did extraordinarily well. Much of the credit for this performance, at least in C Company, goes to the professionalism and leadership skills of the noncommissioned officers. Their ability to impart instructions, knowledge of the Panamanian people and culture, and willingness to use initiative molded their soldiers into a winning team. One significant problem of restrictive rules of engagement is that they hamper the very initiative which is the cornerstone of US Army tactical doctrine. The C

Company leaders, because of their Nimrod Dancer experience, were able to strike the necessary fine balance and conform to the rules of engagement while conducting independent actions.

The strength of a volunteer Army over a draft force was clearly demonstrated. The soldiers did not protest or feel morally distraught over their constabulary role. Just the opposite. Morale was quite high throughout the entire operation. The soldiers had volunteered for the task which confronted them; it was not something thrust upon unwilling pseudo-civilians. Also, the high average education level and selectiveness of the volunteer Army enabled the leadership to impart complicated rules of engagement, with many gray areas, with little fear that something would go terribly wrong. With a less-select pool of soldiers, leaders might be forced to make the rules of engagement more defined and less adaptable to a changing situation. This might lead to more force being used than necessary in an engagement. In Panama, the rules of engagement constantly changed to respond to the modulation of the threat. Often, lives of American soldiers were placed in deliberate jeopardy rather than subjecting the populace to unnecessary damage or suffering.

Based on my observation of US soldiers in Panama, there is no way that excessive use of firepower was the norm. However, it is true that there was a disturbing lack of training for low-intensity warfare for these light infantry soldiers.

- *Spanish Fluency.* The presence of soldiers in the US Army who speak fluent Spanish—C Company had nine—was a tremendous asset dramatically helping to improve relations with the Panamanian communities and increasing the ability to extract intelligence at the platoon and company levels. These company interpreters were often invaluable during patrol operations. Unfortunately, the availability of such a large number of interpreters is possible only if our next conflict is in a Spanish-speaking country. The Army must encourage language and cultural studies of possible deployment areas in units likely to participate in low-intensity conflicts. These studies should be a regular feature of a light infantry unit's training program.

- *Dealing with the Press.* In any conflict, but especially in a limited one, the strategic Achilles' heel of the US Army is American public opinion. Both US policymakers and our country's enemies target American public opinion in order to affect US support for a conflict.[11] Even privates walking through a neighborhood on patrol need to know how to deal with the press. It sounds paranoid, but soldiers need to be able to handle themselves in a professional manner when a microphone and mini-cam are on the scene. If the US soldiers conduct themselves poorly, this negative impression could be immediately transmitted to the United States and undercut support for the operation. Preparing soldiers to deal with the press is a significant responsibility of leaders in the modern Army.

• *Force Structure, Doctrine, and Training.* Light infantry units, although formed primarily for low-intensity warfare, often find training at their home post dominated by exercises oriented toward the more easily simulated mid- to high-intensity battlefield. Of course a mid- to high-intensity conflict is the most dangerous prospect, but it is also the most unlikely for light infantry. The war in the Persian Gulf demonstrated that the use of light infantry is far from certain when a higher-intensity conflict does erupt. Months were spent transporting heavy mechanized and armor forces to the Gulf, while four light divisions stayed put in the United States. This latter force never went to the Gulf, even though it could have arrived much more quickly while using only a fraction of the transport. The reason for this deployment decision is obvious. The terrain and enemy in the Gulf dictated that a heavier force be used.[12]

Those who write Army doctrine should look at this recent practical encounter with selecting roles for light infantry forces and realize that work needs to be done to focus light infantry training almost entirely on low-intensity conflict. Not only should this training be concerned with cordon and search missions in restrictive terrain, but it should also incorporate the practice of mundane tasks like protection of key facilities, riot control, learning how to develop local intelligence networks, and other civil affairs tasks. These tasks cannot be as systematized, for example, as setting up a patrol base, but they are just as necessary. The recently published FM 100-20, *Low-Intensity Conflict*, contains many such recommendations.[13] It is now incumbent upon those responsible for training the light infantry soldiers to put these recommendations into action.

Sociologist Morris Janowitz once looked at this issue, arguing that some units in the US force structure should be trained primarily to act as a constabulary—not military police, civil affairs experts, Special Forces, or Ranger soldiers—but a combination force prepared to act on all levels of low-intensity conflict. Recommending a more stabilized and longer-serving officer and enlisted element in these constabulary units, Janowitz characterized this force as acting with "the minimum use of force, and [seeking] viable international relations, rather than victory."[14] What Janowitz advocated was training to develop a specialized soldier who is constantly able to see the greater political objective even while involved in a dangerous military predicament. Where before, Clausewitz's concept of marriage between military force and political policy was thought to operate primarily in the realm of politicians and generals, it is clear today that every soldier in a low-intensity conflict must comprehend the concept before he can undertake the action to see that it is realized. Otherwise, restrictive rules of engagement may appear to the soldiers as mere obstacles and hindrances to be circumvented.[15]

Another desideratum is for officers in light infantry to be intensively schooled in civil-military affairs. Central American expert Gabriel Marcella

has suggested closely tying together civilian and military efforts by expanding joint educational programs, expanding social links and lines of communication between the two groups to prevent isolation, and developing a cooperative doctrine for low-intensity conflict that is mindful of both civilian and military concerns.[16]

As the Army's doctrine of AirLand Battle evolves, it is essential to thoroughly assess the recent Panama experience and revise our attitude concerning low-intensity conflicts. The Gulf War may be a detriment in this respect because it was more recent and more spectacular. However, it should not be forgotten that the next conflict our light divisions will face is more likely to be in the recesses of some *barrio* than on the sands of the Middle East. Light infantry must focus on low-intensity conflict and develop a training program that enacts the doctrine outlined in FM 100-20. The next time we may not be engaged in an area as familiar as Panama or against an enemy force so feeble.

NOTES

1. Michael T. Klare, "The Interventionist Impulse: U.S. Military Doctrine for Low-Intensity Warfare," in Michael T. Klare and Peter Kornbluh, eds., *Low-Intensity Warfare* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), p. 55.

2. Kenneth J. Jones, *The Enemy Within* (El Dorado, Panama: Focus Publications, 1990), p. 7. For another calculation of casualties, see Thomas Donnelly, et al., *Operation Just Cause: The Storming of Panama* (New York: Lexington Books, 1991), p. 390.

3. Under the COHORT system, some stability and cohesion are maintained since a company can train generally the same soldiers for at least three years. This type of system is ideal for a unit focused on low-intensity conflict.

4. Including this author.

5. Richard L. Millett, "The Aftermath of Intervention: Panama 1990," in *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, 32 (Spring 1990), 1.

6. Ibid., p. 6.

7. Stephen D. Goose, "Low-Intensity Warfare: The Warriors and Their Weapons," in Klare and Kornbluh, pp. 98-101. Unfortunately, some of the highly skilled and motivated personnel channeled to the light infantry divisions who were responsible for much of this superior performance are now being diverted to other units.

8. The monograph by Clarence E. Briggs, *Operation Just Cause* (Harrisburg: Stackpole Books, 1990), sets forth the idea of dividing the US intervention into three phases, using successively soldiers of violence, constables, and role models.

9. The individuals reported to be inside the residence included Captain Gonzalo Gonzalez (responsible for segments of Noriega's personal security force), Lieutenant Colonel Luis Cordoba (a leader of the Panamanian secret police), and Major Edgardo Lopez (chief spokesman for the PDF).

10. Edward N. Luttwak, "Just Cause—A Military Score Sheet," in *The Washington Post*, 31 December 1989, p. C4; rpt. *Parameters*, 20 (March 1990), 100-01.

11. Robert B. Killibrew, "Force Protection in Short Wars," *Military Review*, 71 (March 1991), 30.

12. Michael J. Mazarr, *Light Forces and the Future of US Military Strategy* (New York: Brassey's [US], 1990), p. 82. Mazarr predicted months before the invasion that the next conflict would probably occur in the Persian Gulf and that light infantry forces would not be used.

13. Morris Janowitz, "The Future of the Military Profession," in Malham M. Wakin, *War, Morality, and the Military Profession* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1986), pp. 59, 61. For an interesting argument that US Army military police units can perform such a constabulary role, see Charles A. Hines, "Military Police in Contingency Operations: Often the Force of Choice," *Parameters*, 20 (September 1990), 11-18.

14. US Department of the Army, *Military Operations in Low-Intensity Conflict*, Field Manual 100-20 (Washington: GPO, 5 December 1990).

15. Richard Szafranski, "Thinking About Small Wars," *Parameters*, 20 (September 1990), 46-47.

16. Gabriel Marcella, "The Latin American Military, Low-Intensity Conflict, and Democracy," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, 32 (Spring 1990), 70-72.