

Importance of Recognizing History Lessons in Current Conflicts for the NCO

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Abstract

Is it important for military professional Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs') of the United States Army to take time out of the busy schedules to study military history. Looking back over history we can see trends that have occurred which an NCO who studied and or recognize historical battles and actions would recognize these trends and could adjust accordingly. A look at use of torture in the French-Algerian war of 1954-1962, we learned the use of that torture undermined the goal of the French, and empowered the insurgency. This is exactly what has occurred in current conflicts. A look at the three warring factions of the Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Croatian conflicts show us a similar trend with the three Muslim factions in Iraq during this current conflict. Looking back thru the history of the NCO, we recognize that the NCO is the implementer of all orders and tactics as given by the commander. The NCO is on the front line, and can more readily recognize certain trends occurring and has the ability to adapt and react, but only if the NCO has a working knowledge of military history. This paper will show those trends and the need for NCOs' to study and be knowledgeable in military history to assist commanders with the appropriate action.

Importance of Recognizing History Lessons in Current Conflicts for the NCO

History has shown certain trends repeat themselves. This is not to say history repeats itself, but the trend does. We do not always readily see the trend occurring again until its too late. This essay will show three trends that have repeated, and had we taken time to recall the history of the trend, at the onset of it re-occurring, lessons learned could have precluded having to learn the lesson again; possibly saving lives and ending a conflict sooner.

Compare the current conflict and lessons learned from interrogation techniques of the French in Algeria, 1954-1962, we may have learned that certain techniques create a level of hatred in our enemy, instead of winning the hearts and minds. The Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) of today's military who routinely conducted a majority of the interviews/interrogations on the current battlefield, having learned this lesson could have won the hearts instead of instilling more hatred for America. Protracted Popular War or Conflicts favor insurgents, Algerians adapted it to fit their respective situations, and some Al Qaeda leaders suggest it in their writings today (FM3-24, Counterinsurgency 2006). During the Algerian war of independence, French Leaders decided to permit torture against suspected insurgents (FM3-24, Counterinsurgency 2006). Given at the time it was a new type of war, the threat justified the means, and application of the torture was measured, this implemented the "water boarding" technique. Water boarding is the use of water, to give the interrogated suspect the feeling of drowning to the point the suspect is compelled to speak or suffer death by drowning. During the French Algerian conflict, the negative consequences of this use of torture empowered the moral legitimacy of the opposition and ultimately undermined the French moral legitimacy. France eventually recognized Algerian independence in July 1963 (FM3-24, Counterinsurgency 2006).

Obtaining useful intelligence is one of the most important challenges of counterinsurgency operations. This requirement has focused attention on the interrogation of combatants captured on the battlefield (“Losing the Moral Compass: Torture and *Guerre Revolutionnaire* in the Algerian War,” Lou DiMarco, (Summer, 2006): 63–76). From the beginning of the Global War on Terrorism, the United States of America has been accused of using torture as a means of gathering battlefield intelligence. As signs of the torture and abuses began to surface within Iraq, also began the uprising of not only insurgency against the US Forces, but the very Iraqi citizens supporting the military began to shift to a hatred and non-believing of the actual “Occupation” of Iraq. Harsh interrogation can provide some effective intelligence for use on the battlefield. The question put to most NCOs’ after hearing of these atrocities, was would you allow this to happen. Most NCOs’ all agree if these Soldiers were properly supervised and specific guidance were provided, none of them would allow this type of activity to occur. Proper supervision of rules of warfare, tend never to be overlooked on a grand scale. Minor incidents may always happen, but for the overall abuses to be overlooked or not reported would never happen when sound educated NCOs’ are supervising Soldiers at all levels. Isolated cases of abuse and rumors of torture in the Global War on Terrorism have chipped away at international perceptions of U.S. legitimacy (“Losing the Moral Compass: Torture and *Guerre Revolutionnaire* in the Algerian War,” Lou DiMarco, (Summer, 2006): 63–76). John Murtha cites “incoherent messages from the very top of the American government regarding the use of torture” as one of the reasons for his opposition to continued US operations in Iraq (John Murtha, Congressman, December 2005)

Counterinsurgency in modern conflicts compared to our interaction with three factions in Bosnia and Kosovo conflicts show a success in the latter but a definite failure currently in the Iraq war, where the factions of Sunnis, Shiite and Kurds cannot or will not work together for the greater good of Iraq as a whole. The Yugoslav war was the Serbian drive, after the collapse of communist and federal Yugoslavia at the beginning of the 1990s, to create a new set of borders for areas to be inhabited by the Serbs (Evolutionary Theory and Ethnic Conflict, Law, War and Kosovo, James Gow, p94, 2001). The ability of the international community to engage in Yugoslavia and maintain distance and separation of all factions assisted in the reduction of conflict between all factions. Attempts of separation have failed in Iraq, as one faction always believed the other factions were receiving more than the other and would initiate insurgency against each other and not just against the coalition forces. Collective Security was used to justify both wars. The war was based on a simple Wilsonian Rule: when one breaks the rules of the international community, the international community must punish the violator of those rules (Constructing Collective Security in Kosovo, Prof. Brian Frederking 2009). In all wars there is a human dynamic of the “Us versus Them” (Personal observation, Underwood, 2009), in both conflicts of Kosovo in 1999 and Iraq in 2003 and 2005, one recognizes that the different faction thru history have always seen differences between them and always want to make the rules fit them first before any other faction gets anything. Neither factions want to lose out or give up rule of the country to the other faction for fear of being placed in the bottom class of their respective societies. Although in both cases the Muslim faith was involved in both regions of the world, the ability of NCO's to learn from the latter interaction with the people to keep an insurgency from occurring may have been a valuable tool in the current conflict.

A review of the role of the NCO from Civil war to Vietnam Era, to the current roles of our NCO, will show that through time we have learned the NCO ability to adapt to any situation and provide that leadership and training of any lesson learned and implement into the ongoing threat, whatever it may be. Great NCOs' take great care of their Soldiers, and always use initiative to accomplish their missions. This initiative allows NCOs' to see the threat and interaction with locals and foreign armies and allows them to make certain concessions to accomplish the mission. "The Non-Commissioned Officers should be selected from among the most orderly and best qualified men – upon them will depend very much the order and good conduct of a company" (A Handbook for Infantry, William Duane, 1814). James Moss published the first known handbook for NCOs', the Noncommissioned Officers' Manual. In the 1916 edition Moss wrote "the efficiency, discipline and reputation of a command depend to a great extent on its Noncommissioned Officers" (Noncommissioned Officers Manual, James Moss, 1916). During the civil war thru to the Vietnam Era conflict, NCOs' have steadily become more integrated into the day to day activities of all Soldiers, from Private to the ranks of Generals. NCOs' have become the sounding board for both Officer and Enlisted of all ages and branches of the military. Having experience thru years of service and multiple assignments in various locations and levels of responsibilities, the senior NCO has become the right hand of those issuing orders at the highest levels that must be implemented at the lowest levels. Currently NCOs' have had eight years of contact with a war in Iraq and Afghanistan, and not only implement the commanders orders but also see the Soldiers in their trust and the long term effects of battle stress and the differences in both conflicts. NCOs; have had time to understand the Muslim culture and the differences of that culture in different parts of the world. Having seen differences since 1995, in dealing with different wars in various parts of the world and the

current conflicts, the NCO is and always will be the success or failure of recognizing history and the trend to repeat itself.

Counter Arguments and Responses

The counter argument would be history never repeats itself and should not be used as a tool for current conflict and that every conflict is different. Modern warfare dictates the flow of battle and information and its dissemination are key to success. Should a trend be identified so much time has passed by that using any lessons learned would only hinder the modern war fighter. NCOs' don't have the time to study history as they are directly involved in the day to day business of war.

Conclusion

Studying history and battles past will enhance the NCOs' capabilities of understanding the nation's policies and practices of waging war or conflict. Granted the NCO is the implementer of a commander's vision and orders. However; a NCO is also the enlisted advisor to the commander and having a knowledge base of history and past conflicts could recognize a trend about to occur again as mentioned in this essay, to keep a trend from flashing back. Had NCOs' involved in the interview and interrogation of suspected terrorists kept the trend of torture from occurring again, there would be less hatred for Americans and our nation as a whole. The NCO is also the cool mind in heated situations. Having a cool minded senior NCO involved in day to day operations where small squads and platoons are engaged in daily struggles of battles and loss of fellow Soldiers, would have prevented the open murder of Iraqi insurgents or innocents when in the heat of the moment hot heads prevailed and all clear headed Soldiers forgot their mission and acted in hate and revenge rather than see the big picture and remember why we have the Law of Armed Conflict and Rules of War.

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