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A case study of the Vietnam Combined Action Platoons and Iraq Transition Teams demonstrates that the design elements of an ad hoc advisor team, to include mission type, training, command relationships, and manning structure, have much less effect on the team's success than does the selection of the right personnel for the military advisor mission, in particular the team leader.

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES


**FROM COMBINED ACTION TO TRANSITION: LESSONS ON DESIGNING
EFFECTIVE ADVISOR TEAMS FROM VIETNAM TO IRAQ**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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19 May 2016

Executive Summary

Title: From Combined Action to Transition: Lessons on Designing Effective Advisor Teams from Vietnam to Iraq

Author: Major Christopher M. Scannell, United States Marine Corps Reserve

Thesis: A case study of the Vietnam Combined Action Platoons and Iraq Transition Teams demonstrates that the design elements of an ad hoc advisor team, to include mission type, training, command relationships, and manning structure, have much less effect on the team's success than does the selection of the right personnel for the military advisor mission, in particular the team leader.

Discussion: The Marine Corps has a long history of advising foreign security forces dating back to the small wars in Nicaragua, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic during the first half of the 20th Century. The experience with these engagements resulted in the publishing of the *Small Wars Manual* and recognition of the importance of military advising to counterinsurgency operations. Since that time, the US has continued to engage with host nations to defeat insurgencies around the globe. The unique demands placed upon the military advisor typically relegated this designation to the Special Forces (SF) community, but two counterinsurgency campaigns, the Vietnam War and Operation Iraqi Freedom, were of such a size and scale that they demanded widespread use of ad hoc advisor teams. The Marine Corps has recently institutionalized advising through the creation of an advisor Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) and the Marine Corps Security Cooperation Group, and present day strategic guidance recognizes the importance of advising, yet military doctrine does not address basic structural elements of team design, such as size and composition. This paper will look closely at the Vietnam Combined Action Platoons and Iraq Transition Teams in order to draw conclusions on the fundamental requirements for designing an effective advisor team.

Conclusion: As each counterinsurgency campaign is unique, the structural design of advisor teams can and should adapt to fit the demands of the conflict; there is no ideal solution. However, to ensure the success of advisor teams, the identification and selection of qualified candidates, especially the team leader, must take place through a deliberate and methodical process.

DISCLAIMER

THE OPINIONS AND CONCLUSIONS EXPRESSED HEREIN ARE THOSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT AUTHOR AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF EITHER THE MARINE CORPS COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE OR ANY OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCY. REFERENCES TO THIS STUDY SHOULD INCLUDE THE FOREGOING STATEMENT.

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Preface

Advising foreign security forces is a unique and demanding mission that requires a broad set of interpersonal skills in addition to conventional military knowledge, to the extent that this mission had traditionally been reserved for Special Forces troops. However, under the demands of the counterinsurgency campaign eventually undertaken in the later years of Operation Iraqi Freedom, I was given the opportunity to serve as an advisor to the Iraqi Department of Border Enforcement as a part of Border Transition Team (BTT) 1/5/2 from February to September of 2008. By this point in the war, the advisory efforts of the Marine Corps had progressed to the point that our training and equipping as an ad hoc collection of Marines from within the logistics support element, while not perfect, was far better than that received by most advisor teams throughout the Marine Corps' history. Despite the benefits of a structured advisory program that was well resourced and formally recognized as a main effort, I witnessed widespread failure of group dynamics throughout the teams that squandered resources, placed lives at risk, and ultimately failed our Iraqi counterparts. Eight years later, as the territory in Al Anbar Province that Marines fought so hard to secure lies in the hands of the so-called Islamic State, this research has provided me with the opportunity to reflect upon that experience while determining what elements should be essential when designing future advisory efforts.

The Marine Corps has a long and proud history of advising foreign militaries, but I found one conflict of similar scale and character to what we experienced in Iraq: The Combined Action Platoons utilized in the Vietnam War. With only paltry knowledge of the Vietnam War, this research has further broadened my understanding of that conflict and provided a deal of insight into how our military has evolved over the past half-century. As I read about the Marines in Vietnam patrolling with and living alongside their illiterate yet insightful Popular Force soldiers,

I was reminded of my many nights on patrol with the Iraqi Border Police and the simple meals of rice and bread we frequently shared. Yet I also found enormous differences in how the Marine Corps approached advising between the Vietnam and Iraq Wars. Somewhere, between these two conflicts, must lie some insight about how to implement a large-scale advisor mission.

As I began this research in the fall of 2015, I applied for and received the Marine Corps' new 0570 Foreign Security Force Advisor Free Military Occupational Specialty (FMOS). Looking to put these efforts to good use, I intend on joining the Marine Corps Security Cooperation Group as a member of the Individual Mobilization Augmentee (IMA) detachment. As advisors, it is our responsibility to capture the institutional knowledge gained over the past decade of experience in Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom, and the following pages contain an exhaustive effort on my behalf to do so. However, this report should serve as only a stepping-off point for continued improvement of Marine Corps advising capabilities.

In conclusion, I would like to offer my sincere thanks to my thesis advisor, LtCol (ret) Mike Lewis, for his guidance in developing this topic and his insight into the research process. I have thoroughly enjoyed our conversations, and feel vindicated in my own beliefs regarding the importance of empathy and social skills to navigating the modern battlefield. I would also like to thank my wife, Dr. Jamie Berning, who allowed me to leave my home in Michigan to come play with the Marines for yet another year. Her support for my Reserve career has enabled me to find renewed faith in the Marine Corps after the disaster that was BTT 1/5/2.

"Till the wheels fall off" – Team Motto, Bedouin II (BTT 1/5/2)

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Introduction

As an organization, the Marine Corps has always struggled to maintain a unique role amongst the United States military forces. Reaching back to the march on Tripoli by Lieutenant Presley Neville O'Bannon, the Corps has a long history of leading, training, and advising foreign military forces. In the early twentieth century, the Marine Corps gained significant experience in the so-called Banana Wars in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua, which culminated in the publishing of the *Small Wars Manual*. As a precursor to modern Counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine, this work laid the foundation for advising foreign forces and established the conduct of small wars, to include advising foreign militaries, as a core competency of the Marine Corps.

Following the publishing of *The Small Wars Manual* in 1940, the United States (US) would not face a significant insurgency again until the Vietnam War. While the preponderance of military effort in this war went towards conducting conventional operations, the Marine Corps developed the Combined Action Platoon (CAP) as a way of integrating Marine advisors with local security forces. Although the overall Vietnam War effort is generally considered a failure, the CAP program was a noteworthy implementation of effective COIN warfare. After Vietnam, given the military's experience there and the demands of the ongoing Cold War with the Soviet Union, large-scale counterinsurgency warfare would again take a backseat until after the US invasion of Iraq in the mid-2000s. Facing a fierce insurgency in Iraq after toppling the Saddam Hussein Regime, the US military would again turn to COIN to extricate itself from the conflict. In doing so, the coalition prioritized efforts towards the use of Transition Teams (TTs) to grow capable Iraqi security forces and enable transition of US forces out of the country.

Considering the Marine Corps' experience with foreign military force advising as an element of large-scale counterinsurgency campaigns, the CAPs of Vietnam and TTs of Iraq stand out for one notable reason: in both cases, these teams were composed of an ad-hoc collection of Marines from various combat and supporting Military Occupational Specialties (MOSs). US military doctrine recognizes the training of foreign security forces as an essential element to conducting counterinsurgency operations, but traditionally reserves this mission for Special Forces (SF) troops. Advising foreign troops requires not only mastery of a vast array of conventional military hard skills, such as patrolling and fire support, but also demands a wide subset of soft and interpersonal skills to enable successful interaction with the members of a foreign culture. The selection, training, and culture of special operations forces inherently align with this skill set. However, given the large scale of these conflicts and corresponding demand for advisors, the limited capacity of SF units required the implementation of ad-hoc teams as the standard in Vietnam and Iraq.

With the employment of general-purpose (non-SF) personnel as military advisors now accepted as standard practice, and advising increasingly recognized as a fundamental component of national security strategy, a doctrinal gap regarding the optimal design of the advisor team persists. Though the advisory efforts of the CAP and TT programs bear some semblance, there are significant differences in the basic structure of their advisor teams to include origination and mission, training and organizational support, command relationships, and team composition and selection. A systematic comparison of these advisor team case studies, taking into account historic circumstance, should reveal important lessons based upon these substantial structural differences. However, this examination of the Vietnam CAPs and Iraq TTs will demonstrate that the structural design of an ad-hoc advisor team has much less effect on the team's success than

does the selection of the right personnel for the military advisor mission, in particular the team leader.

As the Marine Corps institutionalizes advising as a mission of general-purpose forces and the Security Assistance (SA) mission becomes increasingly relevant to global stability, the institution must ensure that it is able to identify and select the leaders necessary for mission success.

Background

COIN History and Doctrine

The doctrinal foundation of fighting small wars and conducting Irregular Warfare (IW), to include COIN tactics and the use of military advisors, closely follows the past century of Marine Corps operations. From 1915 to 1932, Marines were engaged in small conflicts throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. Fighting small wars in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua, Marines developed a unique experience set which they aspired to capture first through their professional journal, the *Gazette*, newly founded in 1916¹, and later by publishing the *Small Wars Manual (SWM)* in 1935 with a subsequent re-issue in 1940. Although numerous other publications superseded it, the *SWM* provided groundbreaking insight by diverging for the first time from the traditional view of war as a kinetic clash between two conventional forces. The *SWM* defines small wars as:

*Operations undertaken under executive authority, wherein military force is combined with diplomatic pressure in the internal or external affairs of another state whose government is unstable, inadequate, or unsatisfactory for the preservation of life and of such interests as are determined by the foreign policy of our nation.*²

The manual emphasizes the political importance of military action, where operations must support and enable a functional foreign government. Central to enabling the foreign state is the establishment of a constabulary force to provide for the security of the population. Noting that “small wars represent the normal and frequent operations of the Marine Corps,”³ the *SWM* establishes the importance of foreign military advising in the conduct of counterinsurgency operations while concurrently recognizing the Marine Corps as the premiere organization for such a mission.

The publishing of COIN doctrine continued through the Vietnam War, then stagnated through the 1980s and 1990s. The *SWM* was replaced by Fleet Marine Force Manual (FMFM) 8-2, *Operations Against Guerilla Forces*, in 1962, shortly before the beginning of conventional force involvement in Vietnam.⁴ The Marine Corps republished FMFM 8-2 in 1973 under the title *Counterinsurgency Operations*, and updated it again in 1980. The US Army published Field Manual (FM) 100-20, *Low Intensity Conflict*, in 1981, which addressed the communist insurgencies in El Salvador and the Philippines.⁵ The Army and Marine Corps, which by then frequently shared doctrinal publications, would not address COIN again until after the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the subsequent insurgency there. FM 3-24 *Counterinsurgency*, released in December 2006, defined modern conceptions of COIN in an attempt to redirect the conduct of the war at that time. It recognized the development of host-nation security forces as “an essential aspect of successful COIN operations”⁶ and devoted a full chapter to the topic. In the years since, the US military has continued to produce numerous other doctrinal publications relevant to the military advisor, a synopsis of which is located in Appendix A.

Of note, there is a diverse lexicon surrounding modern conceptions of war, to include terms like small wars, IW, COIN, Support and Stability Operations (SASO), Military Operations

Other Than War (MOOTW), Low Intensity Conflict (LIC), Security Force Assistance (SFA), Foreign Internal Defense (FID), and many others. These terms represent evolution in the understanding of warfare as well as changing political, legal, and organizational considerations. This paper will refer to mainly to COIN operations while discussing military advisor efforts, in recognition that advising plays an important role in numerous typologies of war. Engagement in all conflicts of this nature is a core function of the Marine Corps, and advisory efforts are a critical aspect to any campaign of this type.

Foreign Security Force Advising

The use of military advisors saw widespread implementation in Iraq and later Afghanistan, but as US efforts to reduce the threat of violent extremist organizations expand beyond these wars, advising will be an indelible element of this now global counterinsurgency campaign. The National Security Strategy⁷, Quadrennial Defense Review⁸, National Military Strategy⁹, and Marine Corps Capstone Concept Expeditionary Force 21¹⁰ all discuss the necessity to build military capacity in our partnerships around the globe. These key guidance documents recognize advising as a cost-effective approach to bolster regional stability by leveraging the capabilities and increasing the capacity of Foreign Security Forces (FSF). Advisors accomplish this goal by embedding with foreign militaries in small teams to provide training and enable integration with US combat support and service support capabilities. More importantly, though, advisors provide FSF leadership with advice and counsel, and mentor the forces to develop into a role that supports US security goals. To do so, advisors live, eat, and work directly alongside foreign forces, frequently operating in austere environments far from higher authority. This presents a unique set of physical and mental challenges to the advisor

team, and despite the recognized importance of advisory efforts, there is a surprising lack of guidance for the staffing and preparing of these teams.¹¹

Military doctrine does not provide clear instructions for the design of the advisor team mission.¹² The *SWM* provides basic guidance on the development of a native constabulary and recognizes the importance of restoring native defense and security forces to enable a transition of authority. It emphasizes the importance of local executive authority in establishing, funding, and employing local forces, and provides guidance on the composition, size, administration, supply, recruiting, billeting, sheltering, and feeding of the constabulary. In guiding the selection and employment of Marine forces, though, it only states: "Members of the United States forces serving with the constabulary must possess good judgement and extreme patience, coupled with tact, firmness, justice, and control."¹³

Similarly, contemporary doctrine provides little guidance on how to structure and staff advisor teams. The 2006 *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* focuses on the importance of the Host Nation's (HN) ability to provide for its own security, and recognizes that the training of FSF is now a core function of conventional forces. While the FID mission traditionally fell to SF troops, commanders must now "assign the best qualified Soldiers and Marines to training and advisory missions."¹⁴ Chapter six concerns the development of HN security forces, with an emphasis on planning and the initial development of facilities, material management, and finance. There is a great deal of valuable information regarding the structure of the HN security forces, but the FM does not address how US forces should be structured to undertake the advisory mission. The most recent attempt to provide guidance regarding the structure of advisor teams, found in MCRP 3-33.8A *Advising* states simply: "Advisor team composition should not be approached as a one-size-fits-all solution... Teams should task organize based upon their

mission requirements, personalities, and capabilities, to meet both internal and external functions. Size will be based upon the demands of the environment.”¹⁵

The FSF Advisor MOS and the Future of Marine Corps Advisor Organizations

In 2010, then Secretary of Defense Robert Gates released DOD Instruction 5000.68 calling for the institutionalization of IW capability within the Department of Defense to include the SFA-related ability to "organize, train, equip, and advise foreign military forces."¹⁶ As a result, the Marine Corps implemented the 0570/0571 officer and enlisted FSF Advisors Free MOS (FMOS) through a Marine Administrative Message (MARADMIN).¹⁷ This message emphasized the importance of the advisor mission to “teach, coach, mentor, and advise FSF personnel in order to develop FSF professional skills and build capability and capacity within the organization in accordance with United States Government, service, and FSF objectives.”¹⁸ The Marine Corps has yet to determine a clear plan for the employment of this MOS and develop a Table of Organization (T/O) within the FMF to meet the advisor mission.¹⁹

As the Marine Corps’ advisory efforts in Iraq and later Afghanistan grew and evolved, so too did numerous organizations in support of the advisor efforts. Deploying advisors received training at the respective Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) Advisor Training Centers (ATC) and the Advisor Training Group (ATG) at Twenty-nine Palms Marine Corps Air-Ground Training Center. The Marine Corps Training and Advisor Group (MCTAG) was established by order of the Commandant in October 2007 with the goal of training a cadre of advisors able to deploy in support of partner nations and provide training to the Security Cooperation Marine Air Ground Task Forces (SC-MAGTF). This implementation envisioned advisor teams working for the regional MARFOR commander, with the ability to engage in Security Cooperation activities

prior to conflict, and facilitate the arrival of MAGTF forced into the theater if necessary.²⁰

Marine Corps Special Operations Command (MARSOC) also played an early part in the development of advisory organizations with the creation of the Foreign Military Training Unit (FMTU) and later Advisory Corps.²¹ By 2014, the ATG, Security Cooperation Education and Training Command (SCETC), FMTU, and MCTAG had merged into the Marine Corps Security Cooperation Group (MCSCG). MCSCG is now the single Marine Corps organization responsible for FSF advisor and SFA missions.²²

With the Marine Corps' history of developing HN security forces, ethos in enabling leaders to act with initiative, global forward positioning, and recent efforts to institutionalize advisor capability by establishing the 0570/0571 FMOS and MCSCG, it has solidified future primacy in the DOD with the advisor mission.²³ Success now hinges on the ability of individual teams to function successfully in the demanding advisor environment.

Design of Ad-Hoc Advisor Teams

The Marine Corps has taken great steps to institutionalize FSF advising via the creation of the advisor MOS and the ongoing efforts of MCSCG, but the question remains as to how best to implement the advisor team. Although each situation is unique, there are likely trends and best practices that can inform the design of future advising efforts. In addition, while the advisor MOS creates a cadre of standing experts to provide institutional memory and enable a responsive capability for Marine Corps advisors in small-scale conflicts, any future large-scale COIN campaign must once again rely upon the creation of ad-hoc teams for the conduct of a broad advisory mission.

Methodology for applying CAP and TT Case Studies to Team Design

Marines have always acted as advisors and liaisons as an extension of their primary MOS, but only twice has the Marine Corps implemented embedded FSF advisor teams in large-scale counterinsurgency campaigns. The Vietnam War effort involved wide integration with HN forces, to include partnering at high-level commands and the use of Mobile Training Teams, but the CAP program most effectively implemented a broad advisor mission by integrating small teams of Marines with Vietnamese forces at lower levels. The Iraq war started as a conventional conflict, but after US forces defeated the Iraqi Army and toppled Saddam Hussein, they faced a fierce insurgency. In order to secure the population and enable transition to Iraqi control, US forces devised a COIN campaign that relied heavily on the use of embedded advisor teams within Iraqi Security Force (ISF) units.

Despite outward differences between the Vietnam and Iraq Wars, there are numerous similarities that allow for parity while comparing the CAPs to TTs. Each conflict demanded a large deployment of US military forces, with peak deployment exceeding 100,000 troops. Large battles took place against conventional forces such as the North Vietnamese Army and Saddam's Iraqi Army, but insurgent forces such as the Viet Cong (VC) and Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) heavily influenced the area of operations throughout the war. US support to the Government of Vietnam (GVN) included substantial efforts to enable their security forces, with the most focus going towards the Army of Vietnam (ARVN). Similarly, US efforts in Iraq to support the Government of Iraq (GOI) involved establishing, training, and enabling ISF units including the re-formed Iraqi Army (IA), Iraqi Police (IP), and Iraqi Border Patrol (IBP). These insurgencies grew from religious and ethnic conflicts dating back centuries that also interspersed deep-seated mistrust of a recent western colonial history. The insurgent campaigns consisted of terrorism and

propaganda directed against a largely uncommitted population, and whether dense jungle or dense urban terrain, the insurgences easily found concealment in their surrounding environment. Both wars were unpopular with the American people and lacked a coherent and viable US strategy for long-term victory.

Though the similarities are many, there are obvious differences between the two wars. The Vietnam War was a great-power proxy war to prevent the spread of Communism, while the George W. Bush Administration invaded Iraq as a proactive attempt to secure weapons of mass destruction that threatened a hegemonic America's domestic security. Perhaps more relevant to the comparison of the CAPs and TTs, though, are a number of American cultural developments that took place between the Vietnam and Iraq Wars. Principal among these was the development of communication and media technologies that made the ground realities of the Iraq War easily accessible by a global audience. This in turn has resulted in an increased sensitivity of the American public to the casualties of war. Perhaps more importantly, it has expanded the strategic implications of tactical level actions, resulting in intense scrutiny by senior leaders of the actions of lower ranking military personnel. These developments will ultimately provide an explanation for many of the apparent differences between the structural design of the CAP and TT advisor teams.

Advisor Team Structural Design Elements

As determined previously, relevant COIN doctrine relies heavily on the use of FSF advising efforts but does not specify how to implement advisor teams in practice. Through extensive review of reports and analyses of advising efforts, four categories emerge that define the critical design elements of an ad hoc advisor team:

- 1) Origination and Mission – How did the concept originate? How did this affect their formal mission, and how did the mission change or evolve over time?
- 2) Training and Organizational Support – What training did advisory team members go through, and how were they supported by the larger institution? Did their training and support enable their success or preclude it?
- 3) Command Relationships – What were the command relationship among the advisor team, their partnered HN force, their higher headquarters, the battlefield owner, and other relevant organizations, and what was the impact of these relationships?
- 4) Team Manning and Selection – What was the team T/O, was this adequate to conduct the mission, and how were the teams staffed with personnel? What was the importance of individual personnel and their personalities to the overall team and mission?

These four elements encapsulate the structural design of an embedded FSF advisor team. It is important to note that team leadership is a characteristic inherent to each category. Given the inherent autonomy of an advisor team, the individual team leader must play a key role at each step by making the decisions that will guide the effort and by taking responsibility for his individual team members. From interpreting the mission to leveraging rank to effect command relationships, the advisor team leader is the central structural element of the team.

Measures for Assessing Effectiveness

There is significant inherent difficulty assessing the effectiveness of an advisory effort. The outcome of small wars is often difficult to assess as a whole. Though the development of an effective HN security force is central to any COIN strategy, it is only one of many lines of effort that function across the numerous US government agencies involved in the conflict. At the

individual team level, uncontrollable factors influencing success or failure can vary widely from one team to the next. The goal of this study is to determine which structural elements enable the team to function most effectively in its given environment. To this end, assessment of effectiveness will be based on observations taken from After Action Reports (AARs), lessons learned, and other recollections based on observations at the advisor team level. This study will not attempt to make any conclusions regarding the wider impact of the CAP and TT advisory efforts to the success of their respective COIN campaigns.

Origination and Mission

Vietnam

The development of the CAP program evolved out of a need to secure fixed operating bases throughout the Marine Corps' area of operations in the I Corps Tactical Zone (ICTZ). Shortly after the Marine Corps landed conventional forces in March of 1965, 3rd Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment of 3rd Marine Division seized the air base at Phu Bai. Recognizing that the surrounding hamlet and village militias could be organized as a defense in depth, Capt John Mullen suggested a plan to integrate Marine forces with the Vietnamese Popular Force (PF) platoons. Hearing of this plan, the III Marine Amphibious Force (MAF) Commanding General (CG), Lewis Walt, eagerly championed the idea and appointed Lieutenant Paul Ek to lead the efforts. Walt, as a student of General Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller, who himself gained significant experience in leading local forces in the Nicaragua campaign, was likely familiar with the potential of employing HN security forces.²⁴

Though the original intent of the CAP was to "provide security for rear areas, which will allow Marines and ARVN combat forces to move forward"²⁵ to engage the North Vietnamese

Army (NVA), the avid support of Generals Walt and Victor Krulak, CG FMF Pacific, enabled the program's growth into a broad COIN effort. It attained T/O status with a dedicated director in 1967, and stated objectives included destruction of VC infrastructure and protection of friendly infrastructure, protection of public security, military bases, and lines of communication, organization of intelligence nets, and participation in civic action.²⁶

Iraq

Following the declaration of victory in Iraq in 2003, the Department of State (DOS) Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL) contracted DynCorp for \$450 million to train 50,000 police and the US Army awarded a \$48 million contract to the Vinell Corporation to train the New Iraqi Army (NIA).²⁷ As these efforts proved futile and the country devolved into insurgency, National Security Presidential Directive 36, issued in May 2004, mandated that CENTCOM take responsibility for the organizing, equipping, and training of all ISF, as the job was beyond the capability of the State and Justice Departments. Subsequently, CENTCOM created Multinational Security Transition Command - Iraq (MNSTC-I) to act as a central authority to train and equip the ISF, employ the TTs for leadership and staff development, and coordinate partnership between ISF units and coalition ground forces.²⁸ ISF and advisor units then transferred to the GOI Ministry of the Interior (MOI) or Ministry of Defense (MOD) and Multinational Corps-Iraq (MNC-I), respectively, for operational employment.²⁹ Initially named as Advisor Support Teams (ASTs), the groups later adopted more specific designations including Military, Police, or Border Transition Teams (MTT, PTT, BTT). The Marine Corps initially provided teams to CENTCOM "out of hide," but by 2005 was sourcing teams external to the ground units already in theater.³⁰

The mission of the TTs was broadly defined to train, mentor, advise, or coach the partnered ISF units. In particular, the units focused at the battalion level to improve Iraqi capabilities with command and control, intelligence, logistics, infantry tactics, and fire support. In addition to leadership and staff training, advisors initially fulfilled a dual-hat role by providing a conduit for American medevac and fire support capabilities to the ISF.³¹ Over time, by establishing self-reliant ISF capable of sustaining security, control of the provinces would transfer from the coalition to Iraqi civil authorities, thus enabling American forces to transition out of the area.

Training and Organizational Support

Vietnam

In the early stages of the CAP program under 3/4, Lieutenant Ek, a Vietnamese-speaking officer, was assigned by General Walt to provide initial instruction to CAP members. With the formalization of the CAP Program in 1967, the Combined Action Group (CAG) implemented a formal two-week course for CAP Marines in Da Nang. Much of this time was consumed by administrative and logistics requirements, and the classes favored small unit tactics over advising. In the Fall 1969 syllabus, 39 hours were devoted to military subjects, while civic actions, customs, and personal response (cultural training) accounted for eight, and Vietnamese language for six. With the implementation of student feedback, the school rebalanced the curriculum towards cultural training and began an independent four-week class on language. Insufficient language training was a perennial problem plaguing the CAPs, and the program received little support from the institution outside of the Vietnam theater.³²

Iraq

In 2005, the Marine Corps established the Foreign Military Training Unit to address the need for advisors in Iraq³³, and each MEF established an ATC for initial advisor training. In 2006, Training and Education Command (TECOM) established the ATG to establish advanced training and mission rehearsal training for advisors.³⁴ The training curriculum initially weighed basic infantry techniques and force protection over development of the more nuanced soft and interpersonal skills required of advising, with a negligent lack of language training.³⁵ The ATCs also faced problems with personnel reporting for advisor training without the basic annual training required to deploy,³⁶ and as a result, the ATG faced a wide variance in team capabilities that reduced mission rehearsal training to the “lowest common denominator”.³⁷ Over time, however, the CONUS training incorporated medical, vehicle driving, communications equipment, crew-served weapons, casualty evacuation, foreign language, culture and country, intelligence, negotiation, detainee handling, and civil affairs. Once deployed, most teams received an additional eight days of instruction at the Phoenix Academy run by the Iraq Assistance Group (IAG) at Camp Taji³⁸ and again at Multinational Force-West (MNF-W) headquarters at Camp Fallujah.

In addition to standards based training provided by the MEF ATC, TECOM ATG, the Phoenix Academy, and MNF-W, TTs had access to a host of organizations within the Marine Corps and throughout the Department of Defense to include the Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning (CAOCL).³⁹

Command Relationships

Vietnam

For the first two years of the program, CAPs fell under their parent infantry battalion. With the formalization of the program in 1967, the command relationships shifted to place all CAPs under a regional Combined Action Company (CACO) and 2nd CAG, which reported directly to III MAF. The US-Vietnamese command relationship, while formally only one of coordination, was in practice more nuanced. In the early stages of the combined platoon, there was an informal sharing of tactical responsibilities between the Marines and the PF. More often than not, the Marine squad leader would assume command of the platoon with the PF *trung si* (squad leader) as his assistant squad leader. Over time, the commands would shift to parallel as the Marines recognized the necessity of turning over control of the hamlet to the PF.⁴⁰ The CACO and CAG functioned as a higher headquarters for the CAP, ensuring logistic and administrative functions, but also coordinated in parallel with their Vietnamese counterparts at the district and regional level.⁴¹ This organization is depicted by the organization chart located in Appendix B.

Iraq

The command relationships for TTs in Iraq were often unclear or misunderstood, leaving many teams to fend for themselves in a complex battlespace.⁴² With advisor teams paired to ISF units at the battalion, regimental, and division level, coordination between higher and subordinate TTs was crucial to a unity of effort up and down the Iraqi chain of command. However, teams typically fell under the administrative control of the IAG and operational control of the local ground combat unit (see Appendix B).⁴³ With teams reliant upon their battlespace

owner for logistics, administrative, intelligence, and field service representative support, much time was lost while coordinating support.⁴⁴

Team Composition and Member Selection

Vietnam

The initial manning for a CAP platoon was a squad leader, assistant squad leader, corpsman, and three fire teams of four men each, for a total of 15 men (See Appendix C). These Marines would partner with a PF platoon which consisted of about 35 men, one sergeant (the *trung si*) in control of all privates (*binh nhi*).⁴⁵ This T/O would persist as the basic size of the CAP, though manning levels were a chronic problem with full-strength CAPs rare.⁴⁶

The CAPs initially sought volunteers with combat experience from within the infantry companies. In order to obtain well-adjusted participants, the CAP program considered the volunteer nature of its members to be critical. However, many battalion commanders "volunteered" their misfits into the program over other more suitable Marines who had the capability and desire to participate in the program. Often time those sent to the program had a racist hatred of the Vietnamese or psychological damage resulting from combat experiences.⁴⁷ The result was that carefully constructed relationships were undone with single careless acts by those who lacked the nuanced appreciation of a population-centric campaign. By 1970, facing a shortage of manpower, the program dropped in-country service and volunteer requirements and sourced participants directly from training centers and other units from CONUS.⁴⁸

Iraq

Led by a major or senior captain, a Marine Corps battalion level MTT consisted of 11 core members representing the command and staff functions (see appendix C), but the teams

would frequently receive augmentation up to 20 members with drivers and security personnel.⁴⁹ A division MTT was composed of 15 core members led by a colonel.⁵⁰ Teams also existed at the brigade level, but there was no provision for advisors at the company level or below.⁵¹ The PTTs and BTTs had 11 total military personnel as well, but also included two International Peace Liaison Officers, though they officially fell under the contractor chain of command in MNSTC-I and often required cumbersome logistics support through DynCorp.⁵² Because of the small TT size, there were significant challenges in conducting vehicle convoys, which required nine personnel at minimum, while also manning the team's camp and Combat Operations Center (COC). The enormous equipment set and isolation of the teams required members knowledgeable in full spectrum radio, satellite, and internet communication systems, vehicle and generator maintenance, and cantonment sustainment (plumbing and electrical systems). If even a single member was sick or missing, it could render the team inoperable.⁵³

There was no significant screening process for those involved, and many sent to the TTs struggled to accept the ambiguity of the mission and adapt the interpersonal skills needed for success.⁵⁴ TT members often lacked core competencies and cultural understanding.⁵⁵ The demand for advisors put a great strain on the battalions that sponsored them, and it was rare for a commander to prioritize the TT as the main effort.⁵⁶ The institution attempted to correct this trend by issuing guidance that the Corps must "send its best and brightest to fill these critical billets",⁵⁷ but failed to identify what constituted a qualified candidate.

Summary and Analysis

Ultimately, CAPs accounted for no more than 2,500 of the peak strength of 79,000 Marines in Vietnam, making the CAP program only minor counterinsurgency effort within the

larger conventional strategy. The CAPs grew to a height of 114 teams in 1969, never reaching the ultimate goal of 120, and 2nd CAG was inactivated on 17 May, 1971, marking the end of the CAP Program.⁵⁸ Many argue that the CAP program was a successful and cost effective COIN measure. Combined Action Operations (CAO) served to effectively secure the population, deny resources to insurgents, and identify insurgent infrastructure.⁵⁹ III MAF attempted to quantify success through tools like the Hamlet Evaluation System and Pacification Progress Indices but these efforts were widely referred to as “Krulak’s Fables,” reflecting their exaggerated importance. A better indicator of the program’s success is that an astounding 60% of Marines involved in the program voluntarily extended their tours to remain with their CAP.

Perhaps the best indicator, and that preferred by the CAP Marines, was that village officials frequently returned to sleeping in their own homes instead of the fortified district chief office.⁶⁰

As violence peaked in Iraq around 2006, 700 of 28,000 deployed Marines were located with transition teams.⁶¹ By 2008, over 1,500 Marines had staffed 104 teams, making the Iraq TT effort relatively equal in order of magnitude to the CAP program in Vietnam.⁶² The Coalition attempted to quantify the TTs’ impact on the ISF using Transition Readiness Assessments (TRA) and other reoccurring reports, but the accuracy of these reports is questionable, as inflation likely occurred just as with “Krulak’s Fables.” Col Sean Ryan, in his testimony before the House Armed Service Committee, perhaps best summarized the successes of the TT program: "What you had was a lot of people over there [Iraq] alone and unafraid making things happen or failing to make things happen based on their own personalities or initiative."⁶³

The design of ad-hoc advisor teams in Iraq, as described by the major structural elements above, and the stark differences with the CAP platoons of Vietnam, demonstrates the DOD’s

evolving understanding of COIN since that time. The Marine Corps' implementation of the CAP program relied upon innovation by key individuals, was championed by senior commanders, and, though it evolved towards incorporating COIN principles, was originally implemented for base defense purposes. In contrast, the creation of embedded TTs in Iraq occurred at an institutional level based upon well-understood counterinsurgency principles. Initial efforts by the DOS, correctly reflecting the political nature of such activities, proved insufficient, but CENTCOM quickly adapted to implement the TT program theater-wide. The mission of the teams reflected improved understanding of COIN as well, with CAPs originally implemented as a shaping action to enable the conventional military operations that proved mostly futile, and TTs as the main effort of a counterinsurgency campaign that ultimately enabled US withdrawal. The training and institutional support of CAP members was minimal, with most receiving only two weeks of instruction in-theater. Conversely, TT Marines benefited from a six-month pre-deployment training program involving numerous agencies, and benefited from additional in-country training once deployed. Though it took time to develop these agencies, and the curriculum evolved with much trial and error, the improvement over the instruction received by CAP Marines was enormous. While the formal command relationships for both teams appeared very similar, in practice the CAP Marines exercised much greater direct control over their Vietnamese counterparts. The utilization of TTs in a purely advisory capacity better aligned to the COIN principle of enabling the HN security force to assume full control of the mission, however frustrating it may be. Team size between CAPs and TTs was roughly equivalent, with the increased communications and logistics demands of the TT requiring a slightly more specialized mix of MOSs. Origination and mission, training and institutional support, command relationships, and team composition, as the structural design elements of an advisor team, each

demonstrated a thorough evolution in understanding of the contemporary fundamentals of COIN by the DOD between Vietnam and Iraq.

The most significant difference is that CAPs operated at a platoon level and were led by Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs), whereas TTs operated primarily at the battalion staff level and were composed of officers and Staff NCOs. This is partly due to the cultural reality of the Iraqi security forces, which relied upon centralized control by senior officers and lacked the decentralized execution by NCOs favored in the US military. The lack of an NCO role in the TT program was also due to wider cultural shifts within the US military itself, which increasingly scrutinizes ground-level tactical actions due to their strategic implications. While the advisor role demands education and maturity, and the ability to operate autonomously in a complex situation, the NCOs of the CAP platoons proved their ability to flourish in such a non-traditional role. The marginalization of NCOs in the TT mission sustains a disturbing trend of centralizing responsibility at increasingly higher levels of command in contrast to the Small Wars of the early twentieth century, where NCOs not only led foreign security forces but were responsible for all governing actions within a geographic area of responsibility.

The most important factor to the success of both the CAPs and TTs was the selection of the right personnel, in particular the team leader, for this unique and demanding mission. An Advanced Research Projects Agency study conducted in 1965 recommended selection of the right men as the “single most important step” in improving the advising effort.⁶⁴ The CAP squad leader typically operated in a vacuum, with the chain of command well removed, facing constant challenges to maintain the security of his Marines, the Vietnamese PF, and the local hamlet inhabitants. His actions were the biggest variable in the success or failure of the CAP.⁶⁵ Returning TT members from Iraq also emphasized the critical importance of personnel and

leadership.⁶⁶ With a mission open to interpretation, complex organizational relationships that obscure a clear chain of command, and lack of authority to compel partnered Iraqi units to action, TTs were free to operate within very wide boundaries as they saw fit.⁶⁷ An effective advisor must have persistence, patience, and judgement, as well as social maturity and the ability to understand and leverage cultural differences. Advising also requires the ability to build close personal relationships, which involves not only cultural understanding but also empathy. Many good Marines, fully capable of high performance in a conventional fight, failed to internalize the psychological demands required of an effective advisor.⁶⁸ Paramount to these demands is the added responsibility of leadership, as the team leader had ultimate responsibility for the successes and failures of the team. Despite clear historical lessons learned on the importance of personality to the advisor mission, the TT program lacked a selection process commensurate with these responsibilities.⁶⁹ A special type of leader is required to operate far from higher command, in an unconventional environment of uncertainty and ambiguity, and with absolute control of the team but lacking absolute control of the situation.⁷⁰

Recommendations and Issues for Further Study

The selection of the right Marine advisors is the single most important step to forging an effective relationship with HN counterparts to fulfill the COIN Mission. Advisor duty should be a volunteer action, but furthermore the Marine Corps must implement a screening program to determine adaptability and disposition to embed within a foreign culture, operate in an isolated and challenging environment, and lead others in a setting absent conventional military certainties.⁷¹ Selection of advisors should have at least the same level of scrutiny as recruiting or security guard duty,⁷² and social science tools should be utilized in selecting the correct

“personality profile” for Marines conducting this mission.⁷³ In order to attract only the most highly qualified personnel, the military should create an incentive structure to ensure the attractiveness of an advisor career.⁷⁴

Some issues for further study of this topic are:

- The role of the new Advisor MOS – how should it integrate into current SC operations, and what role should it play with the implementation of a large-scale advising effort in future COIN conflicts?
- Advisor selection process – What tools, techniques, and procedures should be used to select advisors with the correct personality profile?
- COIN Campaign integration – How can military advisory teams better integrate their mission and skills with whole-of-government efforts, and what is their role in the joint, interagency, and international coalition environment?
- Role of the NCO Corps – How should Marines below the Staff NCO level be employed in future advisor efforts? What is necessary to rebuild the trust that historical advising missions provided to NCOs to operate independently as military advisors?

Conclusion

The SWM notes that small wars are “conceived in uncertainty, are conducted often with precarious responsibility and doubtful authority, under indeterminate orders, and lacking specific instructions.”⁷⁵ These descriptions seem all too applicable to the conflicts in Vietnam and Iraq, wars whose ultimate strategic outcome is questionable despite heroic efforts to achieve tactical victory by ground-level military troops. Perhaps the most resounding of these victories was the advisor efforts of the CAPs and TTs, who fought a battle very different from that of conventional

forces. As one historian put it, "The CAP Marines waged war in the hamlets; the main force Army and Marine units all too often waged war on the hamlets."⁷⁶ Reflecting the proper focus on enabling HN forces to provide for their own security, the TT program effectively focused US military efforts against the insurgency in Iraq; the ISF ultimately failed to resist forces like ISIS not because of insufficient efforts by the TTs, but because of institutional failures at the GOI level to provide accountability, administrative process, and effective logistical support.⁷⁷

Moving forward, as the Marine Corps institutionalizes advising as a non-SF task and the SA mission becomes increasingly relevant to global stability, the institution must ensure that it is able to identify and select the leaders necessary for mission success. While advisors will never transform the amateur militaries of struggling nations into premiere warfighting organizations, their efforts to build partner capacity are of crucial importance to the security of American freedom and democracy in the global environment.

Appendix A – List of Relevant Doctrinal Publications for Advisor Mission

FMFRP 12-15 Small Wars Manual (1940 – Reference Publication)

FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 Counterinsurgency (December 2006 - Superseded)

TC 31-73 Special Forces Advisor Guide (July 2008)

FM 3-24.2 Tactics in Counterinsurgency (April 2009)

FM 3-07.1 Security Force Assistance (May 2009)

JP 3-22 Foreign Internal Defense (July 2010)

FM 3-05.2 Foreign Internal Defense (September 2011)

FM 3-22 Army Support to Security Cooperation (January 2013)

JDN 1-13 Security Force Assistance (April 2013)

JP 3-24 Counterinsurgency (November 2013)

FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies (May 2014)

MCRP 3-33.8A Advising (November 2014)

MCIP 3-33.03 Security Cooperation (July 2015)

Appendix B – Command Relationships

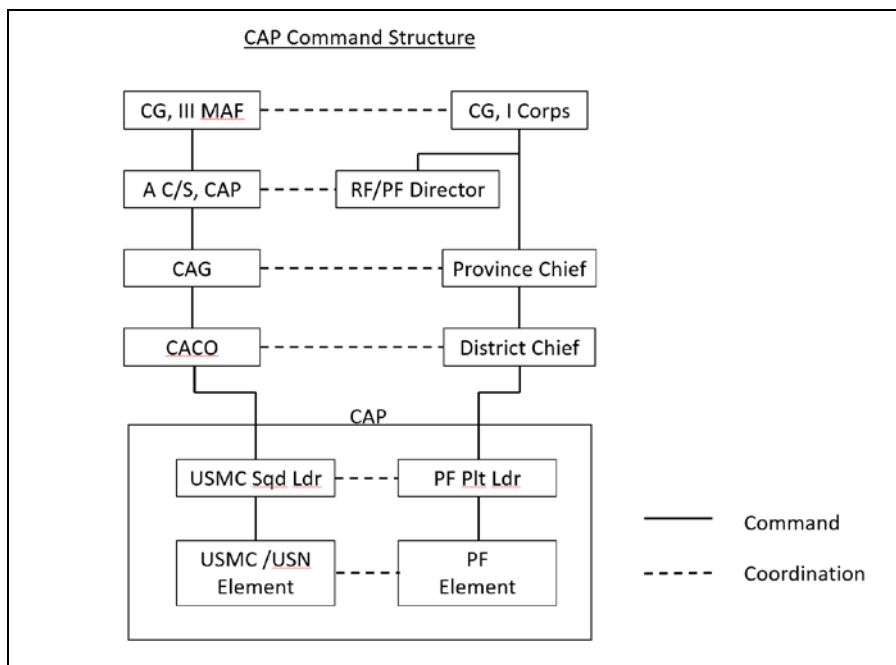


Figure 1: Vietnam CAP Command Relationships¹

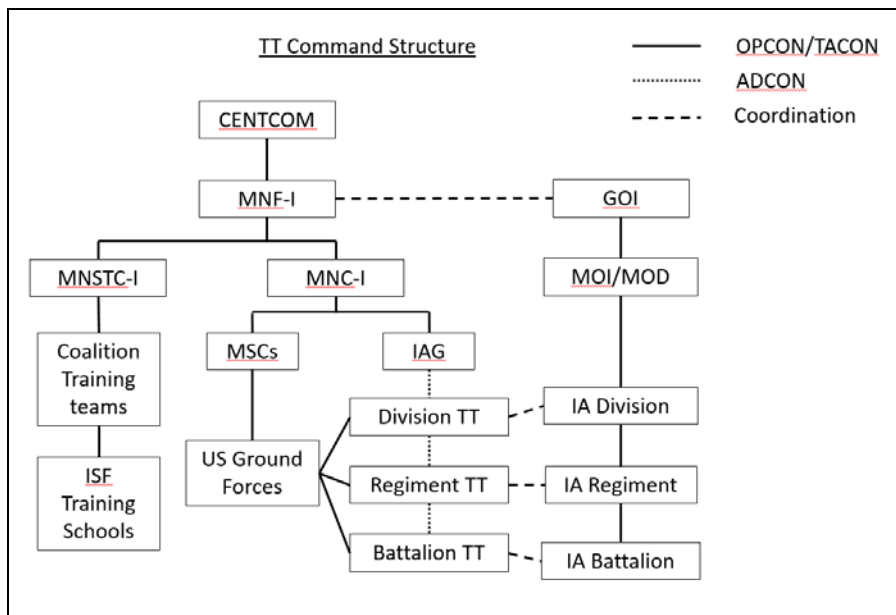


Figure 2: Iraq TT Command Relationships²

¹ Michael Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines' Other War in Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1989), 137.

Appendix C – Personnel Organization

Table 1: Vietnam CAP T/O³

Role	Quantity	Rank
Squad Leader	1	Sergeant
Grenadier / Assistant Squad Leader	1	Corporal
Corpsman	1	HM3
Fire Team leader	3	Corporal
Infantry Marine	9	Lance Corporal

Table 2: Iraq Battalion Level MTT T/O⁴

Role	Quantity	Rank
Team Chief	1	Major
Team SNCOIC	1	First Sergeant/ Master Sergeant
Operations Officer	1	Captain
Fires/Intelligence/Logistics Officer	3	Captain
Fires/Intelligence/Logistics SNCO	3	Staff Sergeant/ Gunnery Sergeant
Communications NCO	1	Sergeant
Medic/Corpsman	1	HM1

² House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Oversight & Investigations, *Stand Up and Be Counted: The Continuing Challenge of Building the Iraqi Security Forces*, 2007, 14.

³ Michael Peterson, *The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines' Other War in Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1989), 138.

⁴ House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Oversight & Investigations, *Stand Up and Be Counted: The Continuing Challenge of Building the Iraqi Security Forces*, 2007, 132.

Appendix D – Acronyms

AAR – After Action Report
AQI – Al-Qaeda in Iraq
ARVN – Army of Vietnam
AST – Advisor Support Team
ATC – Advisor Training Cell
ATG – Advisor Training Group
BTT – Border Transition Team
CACO – Combined Action Company
CAG – Combined Action Group
CAO – Combined Action Operations
CAOCL – Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning
CAP – Combined Action Platoon
CG – Commanding General
COC – Combat Operations Center
COIN – Counterinsurgency
DOD – Department of Defense
DOS – Department of State
FID – Foreign Internal Defense
FM – Field Manual
FMF – Fleet Marine Forces
FMFM – Fleet Marine Force Manual
FMOS – Free Military Occupation Specialty
FMTU – Foreign Military Training Unit
FSF – Foreign Security Forces
GOI – Government of Iraq
GVN – Government of Vietnam
HN – Host Nation
IA – Iraqi Army
IAG – Iraq Assistance Group
IBP – Iraqi Border Patrol
ICTZ – I Corps Tactical Zone
IMA – Individual Mobilization Augmentee
INL – Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement
IP – Iraqi Police
ISF – Iraqi Security Forces
IW – Irregular Warfare
LIC – Low Intensity Conflict

MAF – Marine Amphibious Force
MARADMIN – Marine Corps Administrative Message
MARSOC – Marine Corps Special Operations Command
MCSCG – Marine Corps Security Cooperation Group
MCTAG – Marine Corps Training and Advisor Group
MCWP – Marine Corps Warfighting Publication
MEF – Marine Expeditionary Force
MNC-I – Multinational Corps – Iraq
MNF-W – Multinational Force – West
MNSTC-I – Multinational Security Transition Command – Iraq
MOD – Ministry of Defense
MOI – Ministry of the Interior
MOOTW – Military Operations Other than War
MOS – Military Occupational Specialty
MTT – Military Transition Team
NCO – Non-Commissioned Officer
NIA – New Iraq Army
NVA – Northern Vietnamese Army
PF – Popular Forces
PTT – Police Transition Team
SASO – Support and Stability Operations
SC – Security Cooperation
SC-MAGTF – Security Cooperation Marine Air Ground Task Force
SCETC – Security Cooperation Education Training Command
SF – Special Forces
SFA – Security Force Assistance
SNCO – Staff Non-Commissioned Officer
SWM – Small Wars Manual
T/O – Table of Organization
TECOM – Training and Education Command
TRA – Transition Readiness Assessment
TT – Transition Team
US – United States
VC – Viet Cong

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- ⁶ Headquarters, Department of the Army, *Counterinsurgency*, FM 3-24 (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Officer, 2006), vii.
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