

The Combined Action Program for Iraq Today

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In a counter-insurgency environment such as the one presently in Iraq, what constitutes success? Since it is not the aim of the United States to permanently acquire territory in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), it should be anticipated that at some point American forces will leave while the insurgency to some degree remains. Just as a police force in an American city is not expected to ever win an absolute victory against crime, but rather to keep it firmly under control, so should the relationship of American military forces be considered in relation to insurgent forces in Iraq. It is the reduction of violence against the government and its supporters to a tolerable level that constitutes success. The measure of success in counterinsurgency operations (and the criteria for the inevitable exit) should be to leave the insurgents in such an inferior position as to pose no mortal threat to the civil government. The measure of our success in Iraq after the cessation of initial major military action on 1 May 2003 will be the Iraqi government's ability to preserve itself and provide security for its citizenry without foreign assistance.

Suppressing insurgency in a foreign country is very difficult. The battle space is non-contiguous, with no forward edge of the battle area and no discernable front or rear areas. The main task at hand is usually to identify the enemy, who, after having launched an attack on American forces, may slip anonymously back into the population. The enemy will always have better intelligence and insurgency sympathizers will misinform U.S. forces. Even if the operation is carried out perfectly, one can expect to stay in the country for a long time without the gratification of a climactic and decisive victory such as was exacted on the deck of the *USS Missouri* in 1945.

Such an ongoing struggle exists in Iraq today after the declaration of the end of major military action. While the U.S. has enjoyed some marked success against the insurgency, the situation

has remained frustratingly unstable in parts of the country where portions of the population refuse to put down their arms and join the political process. This problem is compounded for the United States by the fact that the Iraqi government is not capable of keeping the insurgency in check without foreign assistance.

A solution to this situation may be derived from the tactics developed by the Marine Corps during successful counter-insurgency operations in Nicaragua, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and the Philippines in the early part of the twentieth century and later in Vietnam. Specifically, the Combined Action Program should be implemented by the Marine Corps in Iraq in order to deny the insurgency popular support and facilitate the government's potency in the maintenance of peace and order. This should be done with an emphasis on recruitment of Iraqi police and soldiers, the basic training of these forces, the "on the job training" of the forces, and cultural understanding on the part of the Marine Corps.

Combined Action Program Defined

Under the Combined Action Program, formations called Combined Action Platoons (CAP) were stood up during the Vietnam War. They were the integration of Marine squads with "Regional Force" (RF) platoons, which were village militias under the control of pro-Republic of Vietnam province chiefs. The Marine element of the CAP was composed of a squad of twelve Marines, a grenadier, the squad leader and a Navy corpsman. The RF element of the CAP was composed of one sergeant and 35 privates. The Marines provided firepower (to include artillery and close air support), training and access to medical evacuation. The RFs furnished expert knowledge of the population, terrain, and the local Vietcong.¹

Begun in 1965, the mission of the Combined Action Program was to keep the enemy out of the villages in South Vietnam. Combined Action Platoons were each assigned to a village. After having defeated the enemy there they would, unlike conventional American and Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) units which swept an area and moved on, stay and provide the village continual protection from the Vietcong's terrorism, recruiting, and taxation. As the Marines won the confidence of the villagers, the CAPs became a major source of intelligence, and with the security they provided, the Republic of Vietnam could reestablish its authority and undertake economic improvements.²

This was called the "Ink Blot" strategy advocated by the commander of Fleet Marine Forces Pacific, Lieutenant General Victor Krulak. Considering the support or tolerance of the South Vietnamese population as the Vietcong's center of gravity (General Giap had said, "Without the people we have no information...They hide us, protect us, feed us and tend our wounded."), and furthermore observing that eighty percent of the people lived in ten percent of the country, namely the Mekong Delta and along the coast line, he considered the search and destroy missions in the western hinterland practically irrelevant. He said that "the conflict between the North Vietnamese/hard core Vietcong, on the one hand, and the U.S. on the other, could move to another planet today and we would not have won the war. On the other hand, if the subversion and guerrilla efforts were to disappear, the war would soon collapse, as the enemy would be denied food, sanctuary and intelligence." As an alternative Lieutenant General Krulak proposed gradually expanding American control throughout the populated areas by pacifying one town after another. This proposal was carried out in the form of the Combined Action Program.³

The command structure within the CAPs was a delicate matter. There was of course the unequivocal need for unity of command. At the same time the Marines maintained as their goal

the eventual relinquishing of control of the towns entirely over to the RFs. Initially, the Marine squad leader was the CAP commander, and the RF platoon leader was his assistant. Later the command structure became one of adjacent commands, with the Marine squad leader only in command of the Americans, and the RF platoon leader in command of the South Vietnamese.⁴

The Marines who participated in the CAP program were volunteers, and underwent special “CAP school.” They were educated in Vietnamese customs and political structure, and how they fit in to the culture. In the words of one of the pioneering officers in schooling the Marines, First Lieutenant Paul Ek, they had to know “whom to call ‘sir’ and whom to call ‘you.’” Marines’ diplomatic acumen was a critical element in the conduct of their mission since one thoughtless act could undo months of hard work in securing the population’s trust in the CAP. An unkind act or insulting remark might result in the laying of booby traps, ambushes or the Vietcong being informed of the CAP’s disposition.⁵

A salient shortcoming in the CAP school training was Vietnamese language instruction. Many of the Marines could speak around fifty words of the language, which was enough to allow them and the RF to coexist, but was insufficient in developing more meaningful rapport as well as communicating in combat.⁶

At first CAPs operated in their assigned villages only in the daytime, but later patrolled at night as well, and eventually were garrisoned there. The Vietcong reacted at first not by massing and overwhelming the CAPs, but by avoiding them. The first CAPs formed on 1 August 1965, and were not significantly engaged with the enemy until 29 November that year, when a CAP ambushed a Vietcong squad, killing four and capturing one.⁷

One added measure undertaken by some CAPs was the establishment of a “community chest,” which was made up of funds generated from odd jobs the Americans had paid for. This

avoided the appearance of giveaways and upheld Vietnamese pride. Marines were also formally taught in CAP school how to play *co thuong*, or “elephant chess,” to facilitate friendly interaction with the Vietnamese. Another tactic was frequent visiting of families whose members were known to be associated with the Vietcong, which kept the Vietcong family member on the run. And on one occasion a Lieutenant Colonel William Corson challenged the Vietcong to a debate on Marxism to be held during a local truce. The Vietcong, apparently not recognizing debate as one of the seven forms of contact, did not accept.⁸

Measures by which the CAPs gauged their success were: decline in enemy propaganda, decline of Vietcong taxation of the villagers, village officials living in their own homes instead of sleeping in the district chief’s fortified positions, and decline in Vietcong recruitment.⁹ The Marine Corps’ commitment to the CAP program was only tepid. The CAPs never had more than 2,500 Marines under their employ at any time during the war, in contrast to the Marine Corps’ peak strength in Vietnam of 79,000.¹⁰ The program was organic to line battalions from 1965 to 1969, and then became an independent operation under Commanding General III Marine Amphibious Force (CG III MAF).¹¹

The Small Wars Manual

The origins of the tactics used by the Combined Action Program can be found in the Banana Wars of the early twentieth century, in which the Marine Corps successfully put down numerous insurgencies in the Caribbean and Central America. The Marines who executed these operations, believing as they did that these sorts of missions “represent the normal and frequent operations of the Marine Corps,” created the *Small Wars Manual* as a guide to the conduct of similar undertakings in the future. They defined 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.” Today we would call these same operations, of which counterinsurgency is apart, limited war or low intensity conflict or military operations other than war.¹²

Given the nature of small wars, the *Manual* advocates achieving objectives “with the minimum of troops, in fact, with nothing more than a demonstration of force if that is all that is necessary and reasonably sufficient.”¹³ With an acute cognizance that military power alone will not be enough to meet U.S. objectives, the *Manual* stresses the psychological aspects of counterinsurgency. In the military’s more traditional roll of engaging an organized army, hatred of the enemy is encouraged. However in counterinsurgency “the aim is not to develop a belligerent spirit in our men but rather one of caution and steadiness. Instead of employing force, one strives to accomplish the spirit of diplomacy.”¹⁴

The *Manual* puts forth five phases to be carried out when conducting small wars. They are as follows:

Phase 1. Initial demonstration or landing and action of vanguard.

Phase 2. The arrival of reinforcements and general military operations in the field.

Phase 3. Assumption of control of executive agencies and cooperation with the legislative and judicial agencies. [This may involve the establishment of martial law. Marines will carry the burden of most of the patrolling.]

Phase 4. Routine police functions. [During this phase the Marines act as a reserve in support of the native forces and are actively employed only in grave emergencies.]

Phase 5. Withdrawal from the Theater of Operations.¹⁵

The Utility of the Combined Action Program in Iraq Today

The *Manuel* stipulates that its five phases are arbitrary divisions of the operation and that they may be altered as the situation dictates.¹⁶ In Iraq we are presently in phase three, with Marines doing the bulk of the work, specifically: clearing Main Supply Routes (MSRs) of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs); conducting cordon and searches of suspected insurgents; conducting patrols to provide a presence and enhance security; and the conduct of civil-military operations.

Midway through 2004 the insurgents, perhaps recognizing the establishment of Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and Iraqi National Guard (ING) as the United States' bid for success, increasingly targeted them instead of US troops. In this the insurgents have met with great success. In the northern town of Tal Afar for example, up to two thirds of the ING have deserted and the remainder can scarcely be relied upon to fight along side American forces. The Iraqi regular police, when under attack, have fled the enemy with regularity. A State Department report released in the second week of January 2005 states that many of the ISF have been "rendered ineffective."¹⁷

During Second Battalion, Fourth Marines' (2/4) operations in Ar Ramadi from February to September 2004 they performed the above stated tasks with limited Iraqi help for six of their seven month deployment. With mentoring and supervision, the ISF in Ar Ramadi sometimes investigated possible IEDs, provided some useful intelligence, maintained a large security force at the Government Center, directed traffic, and responded to routine law enforcement issues. However, the ISF would not fight with U.S. forces the majority of the time except when they jointly defended the Government Center in Al Ramadi. In the last month of their deployment 2/4 received a 27-man Iraqi platoon of the Specialized Special Forces (SSF) that came from parts of Iraq other than Ar Ramadi, and were quartered within 2/4's fortified positions. The SSF manned

observation posts and checkpoints with the Marines. They were instrumental in putting an Iraqi face on cordon and search operations and they made it possible for 2/4 to pull weapons out of mosques. Hatred of the SSF was evident in Al Ramadi, resulting in fewer opportunities for improved public relations and intelligence gathering in comparison to the CAPs in Vietnam. The proficiency of this new unit was satisfactory given the conditions and available resources, but they did not operate independently due to their preference for having 2/4's firepower on hand.¹⁸

What we need is a means to take us from this situation to phase four, whereby the Iraqis will take responsibility for the missions stated above as Marines standby in reserve in case of grave emergency, and then ultimately withdraw in phase five. Patterned after the Combined Action Program, the means of transition from phase three to phase four should look something like the following.

Marine tactical units would operate with Iraqi police or military forces twice their strength in personnel attached to them and subordinate to the Marine commander. A Marine platoon headquarters would be collocated with a town's local police department or ISF or ING command post to establish a firm base. Two Iraqi squads with the same table of organization as the Marine Corps would perform tactical operations while attached to a Marine squad with the Marine squad leader in command over them.

The Marine company headquarters would also be collocated with one of the reinforced platoons, along with the company 60 mm mortar section. (Machine-gunners and assaultmen would either be attached to the platoons or be retained by the weapons platoon for the defense of the firm base.)

The purpose of creating tactical units which are partly Marine and partly Iraqi with Marine leadership would be to first of all combat the insurgents, secondly to provide “on the job training” for Iraqi forces, and to “put an Iraqi face” on our endeavors for the observation of the Iraqi people. Being a part of a Marine Corps unit is the best way to develop the Iraqi’s will, esprit de corps, and technical and tactical proficiency. As for the two-to-one Iraqi/Marine ratio, this is the goal which should be worked up to. Once CAPs are performing effectively at this table of organization ratio, transition into the fifth phase of the *Manuel* should be considered.

Additionally Marines would receive training in Iraqi culture and history, and take care to observe cultural sensitivity and promote positive public relations. A fine example of this is Captain Daniel Morgan USA, who was an infantry company commander in Mosul, Iraq in 2003. He states that he set about developing a survey of attitudes and needs in Arabic that was common across his area of operations. This, coupled with informing the populace of his goals, served to promote situational understanding on the part of both him and the native populace.¹⁹ The issuance of such surveys is an opportunity for American forces to articulate that we are eventually leaving, but not until a duly elected government is firmly in control. Continued surveys would suggest where the US forces needed to concentrate their efforts.

Better communication between Marines and Iraqis would be facilitated by putting enough Marines through the Defense Language School in Monterey, California to augment existing translators to the point that every Marine squad with its two attached Iraqi squads would have a translator. This is admittedly a daunting goal, but a worthwhile one as it would facilitate the positive effects Marine troops can have Iraqi troops in developing the latter to the point that they are self sufficient. Radio operator to the CAP commander would be an ideal billet for a translator.

Conclusion

Our objective in Iraq should be a viable Iraqi military force to keep the insurgency in check. This is a far more attainable goal than the total eradication of the insurgency. Through the use of the Combined Action Program, with emphasis on the recruitment, basic training, and on the job training of Iraqi forces and the training and employment of interpreters, the U.S. will enjoy its most promising prospect in successfully transitioning to withdrawal.

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End Notes

¹ Peterson: p. 23, 24

² eHistory: p.139

³ Boot: p.297

⁴ Peterson: p. 25, 26

⁵ Peterson: p. 24

⁶ Peterson: p. 24

⁷ Peterson: p. 25

⁸ Peterson: p. 40

⁹ Peterson: p. 25

¹⁰ Peterson: p. 123

¹¹ Peterson: p. 24

¹² Small Wars Manuel: p. 1,2

¹³ Small Wars Manuel: p. 6

¹⁴ Small Wars Manuel: p. 18

¹⁵ Small Wars Manuel: p. 5-9

¹⁶ Small Wars Manuel: p. 5

¹⁷ No Exit Strategy

¹⁸ Hahn

¹⁹ Morgan