

The *Small Wars Manual* and Counterinsurgency.

Captain Rory D. Kent, USMC

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INTRODUCTION

In December of 2006, the United States Army and the United States Marine Corps published *FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 Counterinsurgency*. Prior to this neither the Army nor the Marine Corps had published a manual dedicated to counterinsurgency (COIN) in 20 and 25 years respectively. The operational trends the United States military has experienced since the nation entered the Long War in 2001 propelled an effort by both services to create a manual for “leaders and planners at the battalion level and above.”¹ While the manual provides soldiers and Marines with a broad scope of planning considerations, the authors missed a tremendous opportunity to reinvigorate the study of small wars and counterinsurgency by neglecting to incorporate the *Small Wars Manual* into *FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 Counterinsurgency*.

The only mention *Counterinsurgency* gives to the *Small Wars Manual* is a listing in the annotated bibliography; sound doctrine provided by the *Small Wars Manual* does not appear anywhere within the main text of *Counterinsurgency*. The absence of any meaningful mention of the *Small wars Manual* is highly disturbing since the work offers timeless and enduring lessons, advice, considerations, and

¹ *FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 Counterinsurgency* (Washington DC: Department of the Army, 2006), vii.

techniques in dealing with insurgents and revolutionaries. The authors should have drawn more material from the United States Marine Corps' *Small Wars Manual* because, in terms of discussing leadership, training, cultural considerations, and the fluid and dynamic nature of the COIN environment, the *Small Wars Manual* surpasses *Counterinsurgency* in both content and context.

BACKGROUND

While every small war may not necessarily involve counterinsurgency operations, every counterinsurgency operation occurs in the context of a small war. America's military has had a wide breadth of experience in which to draw from in fighting small wars. In fact, large scale conventional wars have been the exception rather than the norm. From William Eaton and Neville O'Bannon's excursion across Tripoli to operations during the Philippine Insurrection and from Vietnam to OEF and OIF, soldiers and Marines have a rich history and prodigious experience with counterinsurgency operations and small wars.

The Marine Corps published the *Small Wars Manual* in 1940 to expound on its operational heritage and deep involvement in dealing with insurgencies and revolutions. The lessons learned and broad planning guidance contained

in the manual provides every Marine the opportunity to learn from the vast experiences of small war veterans.

LEADERSHIP AND COIN

One of its most glaring faults is the *Counterinsurgency* manual's failure to address the importance of leadership at all levels during COIN operations. Leadership as a force multiplier is more effectively stated in the *Small Wars Manual*. The *Small Wars Manual* addresses the high degree of uncertainty with regards to one's authority, mission, and role while conducting COIN operations. It states,

[s]mall wars demand the highest type of leadership directed by intelligence, resourcefulness, and ingenuity. Small wars are conceived in uncertainty, are conducted often with precarious responsibility and doubtful authority, under indeterminate orders lacking specific instructions.²

Leadership remains a vital component in overcoming the uncertainty that often plagues these missions. In contrast, when the *Counterinsurgency* manual discusses leadership, the work tends to do so in a vacuum and fails to place this topic within the context of the operating environment. Instead of discussing how missions and one's authority may be ambiguous at times, *FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 Counterinsurgency* tends to discuss leadership in terms of

² *Small Wars Manual* (Washington DC: Department of the Navy, 1990), 1-6.

dealing with external agencies; in chapter 7 it explains that

COIN operations require leaders to exhibit patience, persistence, and presence. While leading Soldiers and Marines, commanders cooperate with, and leverage the capabilities of, multinational partners, U.S. Government agencies, and nongovernmental organizations.³

The *Counterinsurgency* manual should have placed leadership in the same context that the *Small Wars Manual* had in order to convey the importance of leadership during counterinsurgency operations.

HOST NATION TRAINING

Another aspect of counterinsurgency operations that the *Counterinsurgency* manual should have borrowed from the *Small Wars Manual* is the importance of training a host nation's (HN) military and police force. While *FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 Counterinsurgency* devotes an entire chapter on the subject, the *Small Wars Manual* delves into greater detail on issues that will have a direct impact on the success of the training and employment of indigenous security forces. While both manuals discuss the importance of paying good salaries and improving working conditions and equipment, *FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 Counterinsurgency* does not give readers the rationale or pre-requisite background

³ *FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 Counterinsurgency*, 160.

information as to why this is perhaps the most important aspect of developing a military police force. *FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 Counterinsurgency* argues,

good planning ensures that police pay, housing, benefits, and work conditions attract a high quality of police recruit as well as discourage petty corruption.⁴

While this statement is true, it fails to convey the historical and sociological reasoning for planning such actions. The *Small Wars Manual*, on the other hand, contends,

[t]he confidence and loyalty of the native troops is promoted by careful supervision of their material needs. More often than not, they will have been accustomed to meager salaries irregularly paid, scant food carelessly provided, as well as indifferent shelter, clothing, and equipment. When they are regularly paid in full on the date due, when fed adequately as provided by the allowance, and when good shelter, clothing, and equipment are provided, native troops will usually respond in the quality of service rendered.⁵

This description allows the reader to empathize with those they are tasked to train and tends to compel one to work harder to ensure that host nation forces under one's tutelage are treated with the same respect one shows towards the welfare of subordinate Soldiers and Marines. Just as a leader would work hard to ensure that his or her

⁴ *FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 Counterinsurgency*, 154.

⁵ *Small Wars Manual*, 12-12.

subordinate's needs are met, so too should troops conducting COIN operations, specifically those geared towards the creation of security forces, be persistent about caring for the welfare of those forces. The *Small Wars Manual* explains this more lucidly than the *FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 Counterinsurgency*, which remains rather nebulous on the matter.

OPERATIONAL CULTURE

Another key aspect of conducting counterinsurgency operations is obtaining an understanding of the cultural landscape in which one is operating. The *Small Wars Manual*, built upon years of experience, is very direct in extolling the importance of understanding the culture of one's area of operations. Whereas the *Counterinsurgency* manual restates the same tired clichés soldiers and Marines have heard prior to all deployments, such as "Cultural knowledge is essential to waging a successful counterinsurgency... American ideas of what is 'normal' or 'rational' are not universal," the *Small Wars Manual* takes a deeper approach by enhancing the need to prioritize cultural understanding vis-à-vis planning.⁶ According to the *Small Wars Manual*, planners and leaders must undertake a comprehensive study of the cultural environment in their

⁶ *FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 Counterinsurgency*, 27.

areas of operation. The manual argues that “the campaign plan and strategy must be adapted to the character of the people encountered” and that

[a]fter a study has been made of the people who will oppose the intervention, the strategical plan is evolved. The military strategical plan should include those means which will accomplish the purpose in view quickly and completely. Strategy should attempt to gain psychological ascendancy over the outlaw or insurgent element prior to hostilities.⁷

The plan must conform to the cultural landscape; the first aspect of planning must involve the enormous effort associated with cultivating an understanding of the people living in that particular area. In order to plan effectively, a unit must promulgate anthropological research vice trying to reconcile the cultural landscape to the actual plan.

The *Small War Manual* insists that the commander’s intent, the scheme of maneuver, the task organization, and all of the other aspects of planning be subservient to the cultural characteristics of the people with whom one will either have to make alliances or have to destroy in order to achieve the particular political end-state desired. In doing so, planners must research the history, geography, genealogy, economy, etc., of the people. In short,

⁷*Small Wars Manual*, 1-8.

planners must become amateur anthropologists before developing any plan. Even though the *Counterinsurgency* manual states that “[s]uccessful conduct of COIN operations depends on thoroughly understanding the society and culture within which they are being conducted,” it fails to argue that this thorough understanding must take place prior to developing a plan.⁸ Counterinsurgency operations throughout the past two-hundred years support this assertion. Had the US military possessed a better understanding of the rural peasant class in South Vietnam or the tribal relationships among the Iraqis, early problems and set-backs experienced in these wars could have been avoided.

To avoid cultural misunderstandings that inhibit operational success, the *Small Wars Manual* compels soldiers and Marines of all ranks to form a proper mindset when dealing with another culture. While the *FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 Counterinsurgency* correlates an “immersion in the people and their lives” with victory, the *Small War Manual* takes a more authoritarian tone when discussing how to deal with the populous; it contends,

[t]he indoctrination of all ranks with respect to the proper attitude toward the civilian population may be accomplished readily by means of a series of brief and interesting lectures prepared under the direction of the military

⁸ *FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 Counterinsurgency*, 34.

commander and furnished all units.⁹

The *Small Wars Manual* continually reinforces the need to promote “a serious study of the people, their racial, political, religious, and mental development” because in doing so “the reasons for the existing emergency may be deduced.”¹⁰ Furthermore, this manual asserts that by maintaining an understanding of the people, units may predict “repercussion[s]” for actions taken by their troops.¹¹ By holding leaders accountable for stressing cultural knowledge and anthropological studies among subordinates, the *Small Wars Manual* delves deeper into the challenges units may face while planning and training for COIN operations. In contrast, *FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 Counterinsurgency* does not effectively highlight possible repercussions of failing to comprehend the social and economic factors behind the conflict.

COIN ENVIRONMENT

In addition to understanding the unique nature of each cultural landscape, the *Small Wars Manual* also provides universal truths that are evident in all counterinsurgency operations, truths that are stated more directly in this manual than in the *Counterinsurgency Manual*. The *Small*

⁹ *FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 Counterinsurgency*, 35 / *Small Wars Manual*, 1-8.

¹⁰ *Small Wars Manual*, 1-10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Wars Manual argues that units should operate with “caution and steadiness” instead of with a “belligerent spirit.”¹² Having an overly aggressive stance increases the chances of harming innocents during patrols and other operations. A commander who can obtain tactical or operational success “without firing a shot has attained far greater success than” a leader who shows little restraint.¹³ The manual demands that individuals must constantly shift between a “peaceful and warlike temperament.”¹⁴ Thus, it implores Soldiers and Marines to develop an appreciation for using the appropriate level of force at the appropriate time. One moment they could be assisting a community in conducting civic functions and then shift to a combat function seconds later. During combat, troops must apply the most prudent amount of force in order to destroy the enemy while limiting the effects of fires on the civilian innocents; this has always been a tremendous challenge. When the threat is negated by swift and violent action, that individual Soldier or Marine must return to a less violent temperament. Proportionality becomes a vital weapon in fighting insurgents and revolutionaries.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Whereas the *Small Wars Manual* associates proportionality as a warfighting function, much like fires and maneuver, the *Counterinsurgency* manual fails to describe proportionality in these terms; rather, the manual states that proportionality "and discrimination applied in COIN require leaders to ensure that their units employ the right tools correctly with mature discernment, good judgment, and moral resolve."¹⁵ Obviously, units must display a prodigious amount of maturity, judgment, and moral reasoning in all situations, not only during counterinsurgency operations. The *Small Wars Manual*, however, specifically discusses proportionality as a concept that is essential to combating insurgencies and does so in a manner that stresses the way a soldier or Marine must carry himself while performing different tasks.

CONCLUSION

Despite its flaws, *FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 Counterinsurgency* is a relevant document that contributes to a greater understanding of the COIN environment. Nevertheless, the authors unfortunately did not feel compelled to include the *Small Wars Manual* in different parts of the *Counterinsurgency* manual. The enduring lessons and operational relevancy of the *Small Wars Manual*

¹⁵ *FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 Counterinsurgency*, 163.

adds greatly to the understanding of operating in a fluid and dynamic environment. It remains an historic document of which soldiers and Marines should take full advantage while conducting operations in the OEF and OIF. Hopefully, when *FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 Counterinsurgency* is updated, the authors will include excerpts from the *Small Wars Manual*.

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