

# COUNTERINSURGENCY DIPLOMACY: Political Advisors at the Operational and Tactical Levels

Dan Green



*In the conventional war, military action, seconded by diplomacy, propaganda, and economic pressure, is generally the principal way to achieve the goal. Politics as an instrument of war tends to take a back seat and emerges again—as an instrument—when the fighting ends . . . The picture is different in the revolutionary war. The objective being the population itself, the operations designed to win it over (for the insurgent) or to keep it at least submissive (for the counterinsurgent) are essentially of a political nature. In this case, consequently, political action remains foremost throughout the war. It is not enough for the government to set political goals, to determine how much military force is applicable, to enter into alliances, or to break them; politics becomes an active instrument of operation. And so intricate is the interplay between the political and the military actions that they cannot be tidily separated; on the contrary, every military move has to be weighed with regard to its political effects, and vice versa.*

—David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare*.<sup>1</sup>

*That's something the State Department is supposed to handle, but I was the Marine platoon commander, and I had to decide.*

—Iraqi war veteran Nathaniel Fick on whether or not to support a local mullah and distribute fresh water to a Baghdad neighborhood.<sup>2</sup>

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PHOTO: The author observing the counting of ballots for the Uruzgan Provincial Council and Parliamentary elections in Afghanistan in 2005. (courtesy of the author.)

**F**AILURE TO INCORPORATE political goals and requirements into military action has often slowed or even prevented the timely resolution of conflicts. This has especially been the case in the insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq, where we initially proceeded as if military power alone could achieve our aims. Political activity in concert with military operations, especially at the operational and tactical levels, will play a huge role in any favorable resolution of these conflicts and any future conflicts that fall under the rubric of unconventional warfare. The insurgencies we face today are, in part, a result of the sweeping political changes wrought by globalization and the relative decline of the nation-state as the basis for international order. Consequently, conventional military force alone will not achieve victory—there will be no battles between massive armies leading to a final resolution of the conflict. Nor will typical state-to-state diplomacy, in which conflict is resolved through a peace treaty, help stanch such insurgencies. In order to succeed, we must try a new approach.

In order to maintain our status as a leading nation and to defend and extend our interests, the United States must integrate military strategies with other

national capabilities to create a robust counterinsurgency capacity comprised of all elements of national power—economic, political, information, and military. Additionally, we must deploy these elements of national power at a much lower level and with a consistency that we have not yet seen in our present conflicts. If we do less than this, we will handicap ourselves in a fight against enemies whose borderless “state” is an ideology, ethnic or tribal identity, or religious viewpoint. The enemy does not, unfortunately, make the same clear distinctions we do between political and military strategies and tactics. He does not fight one-handedly, and neither should we.

## The Counterinsurgency Challenge

Counterinsurgency efforts have taken on an increasingly important role in the U.S. strategy to defeat global terrorism.<sup>3</sup> Since 2001, the budget of the U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM), the command specializing in counterinsurgency, has increased from roughly \$3.8 billion to \$6.6 billion, and the number of its personnel has increased by 6,000, to 51,411.<sup>4</sup> Special operations forces (SOF) are deployed in well over a hundred countries, and in March 2005, President Bush put SOCOM in charge of “synchronizing” anti-terrorism efforts. With these additional resources, SOCOM has significantly increased the number of its Special Forces (SF), civil-affairs, and psychological operations units—all units deeply involved in counterinsurgency operations. Within the U.S. Army, the recent release of a revised counterinsurgency manual and the creation of a panel of counterinsurgency advisors and a counterinsurgency school in Iraq serve to underscore how much unconventional warfare has also affected the thinking and strategy of the conventional military.

With this shift in military priorities has come a concomitant, though tentative, movement in diplomatic priorities for the U.S. Department of State (DOS). DOS personnel are serving on provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) located throughout Afghanistan and Iraq, helping to facilitate reconstruction, development, and good governance while improving security. Some of these personnel are attached to U.S. conventional forces and are sometimes, along with members of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID),

United States Department of Agriculture, military civil-affairs units, and contract police advisors, collocated with SOF units. As of 2 October 2006, there were 20 DOS representatives in Afghanistan and 29 in Iraq advising PRT military commanders or leading PRTs and furthering U.S. foreign policy goals.<sup>5</sup> In Afghan provinces such as Uruzgan, the homeland of Taliban founder Mullah Omar and the site of an active Taliban insurgency, DOS personnel have played an integral role in a comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy. What follows are some thoughts on how the DOS may want to incorporate its priorities more fully into a military effort. They are gleaned from the author’s one-year tour as the PRT political advisor (POLAD) in Uruzgan.

## Providing Political Leadership

In many conflict and post-conflict situations, a viable, effective government has all but disappeared. In some cases, it may have never existed at all. At the tactical and operational levels, a trained DOS employee can approximate many of the functions of a nascent government or extend the reach of an existing central host government by facilitating effective governance. Understanding how a local government functions as a viable and effective institution for the community, and knowing how a community operates, are critical to winning a counterinsurgency. To a significant degree, SF units have already incorporated these kinds of considerations into their counterinsurgency planning. However, the type of information that SF units typically collect in the field focuses largely on finding, fixing, and finishing the insurgent rather than specifically on improving governance for the long term. While the SF recognize that good governance, coupled with informed and targeted reconstruction and development projects, is integral to a successful counterinsurgency effort, they generally do not have experts

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who can implement durable programs. Because his training, background, experiences, and purpose are different from those of many SF members, a DOS employee focusing on political development can become a significant asset to a deployed SF unit. His contribution to the counterinsurgency effort can be as beneficial as kinetic operations, if not more so.

Decisions made by military units at the tactical level can often impact the strategic foreign policy goals of the U.S. Government. This tendency has been amply demonstrated in Afghanistan and Iraq. Aware of the government's policy priorities, a deployed DOS employee can provide increased direction to a unit as it confronts political, diplomatic, and civil-affairs problems. His guidance and input can be especially useful and important because the quick pace of military operations, especially during combat, often requires on-the-spot decisions that a U.S. embassy would be slow to make. Absent an embassy's presence, such as in Iraq and Afghanistan at the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom respectively, formal embassy decisions would be impossible to obtain. Because the DOS employee would be aware of the situation on the ground, this would also immeasurably improve the situational

awareness of the U.S. embassy, once one had been established, and of policy makers in Washington, D.C. And finally, because the chain of command for a DOS employee is considerably flatter than that of most military units, a field employee is perhaps one or two layers away from the ambassador and only an e-mail away from the embassy's staff; he can therefore quickly affect a host government's policies on key issues by persuading the embassy to engage with that country's president or relevant ministers. This capability is also useful to a host government, which can use the DOS employee to check up on its own forces or government employees, thus extending its own reach.

## Building and Empowering Local Institutions

Like members of the SF community, DOS personnel have received extensive cultural, regional, and language training and are skilled at interacting with citizens of other countries. However, as a civilian and a member of the DOS, I had diplomatic priorities that diverged somewhat from those of the warfighter. In Uruzgan Province, my political objectives were to develop governance, improve public administration, and facilitate successful parliamentary and provin-

cial council elections. At the same time, I presented U.S. foreign policy views to local leaders. To these ends, I focused my efforts on building the institution of the provincial shura, a traditional Afghan meeting of tribal elders, which had been reestablished in March 2005 after the Taliban had banned it 11 years earlier. With over 35 members drawn from each of Uruzgan's five districts, the shura was the closest thing to a representative body in the area prior to the fall parliamentary and provincial council elections. By regularly attending its meetings and interacting with its members, I was able to act as an intermediary between tribal and district leaders and the SF and PRT on a range of issues.

One of the key benefits of engaging with the provincial shura, working with its members from various



DOS

Afghan women line up outside a voting place during the successful parliamentary and provincial elections held on 18 September 2005.

tribes, and bolstering it as a representative institution was the positive effect it had on our security operations. Whenever the SF detained an Afghan, for example, shura members would typically ask me to intervene on his behalf, often telling me the background of the person and why he was a community member of good standing. That said, given a chance, the Afghans will use the SF against personal rivals and against rival clan interests, and so I had to be circumspect. I was extremely careful not to come across as trying to tell the SF why they should release someone; instead, I merely gave them the added information to provide some local perspective on why a person might have been detained for reasons other than their being a member of the Taliban. This approach proved particularly successful in helping to release a prospective parliamentary candidate who had been detained largely based upon information from a political opponent.

The shura also functioned as an excellent means of controlling rumors and allowing the community to vent about U.S. military operations. The information we gathered enabled SF and coalition forces to take the pulse of the community and, if needed, to alter their operations with local views in mind. In sum, the shura was useful because it allowed the Afghans to exert some influence on military operations in their community, pass information to the

SF on Taliban movements, and give voice to community frustrations about the security situation.

One key goal the PRT had for the shura was developing its ability to hold provincial government leaders accountable for their actions. On the third and final day of the meeting, provincial directors were invited to speak about their programs, policies, and concerns. The presentations usually followed a two-day session in which shura members would discuss the area's various public issues. For example, because shura members were very concerned about security in Uruzgan, they were interested in getting the local police to go on more patrols in the area, to hold criminals for their full prison term, and to set up more security checkpoints.

As a political officer, I worked behind the scenes to make sure local officials attended the shura and were ready to address its members' complaints. I also made sure that representatives from the PRT, SF, and the Afghan National Army, along with local elections officials, attended and were prepared to deliver presentations on their activities. I gave the local radio reporter, who had been badly injured fighting the Russians, a ride to the shura, and I provided him with a tape recorder, fresh tapes, and, once a month, a box of fresh batteries. My goals were to empower the shura as a legitimate voice of the people, democratize decision making in the

province, connect the shura to the people by radio, and continue to incorporate accountability into local governance. The relationships I created with these men helped the PRT and SF gain a better understanding of local politics and the relationships between different tribes and individuals. DOS personnel, and civilians in particular, are well qualified to conduct these types of activities, and the information gathered from the shura helped improve coalition planning immensely.

The PRT also focused on facilitating the development of civil society in Uruzgan Province, worked to attract non-governmental organizations to the area, and sometimes took the initiative to



DOS  
An Afghan man waits to receive a ballot from an election worker during the 2005 parliamentary and provincial elections.

create non-governmental institutions. Regarding the latter, I met with local public officials and business leaders about their interest in creating a chamber of commerce for the provincial capital of Tarin Kowt. Because many locals were familiar with such an institution from their experiences in Kandahar City, they supported the idea. The inaugural meeting of the chamber took place in the Tarin Kowt mayor's office in spring 2005 and included merchants, bazaar shop owners, fuel distributors, building contractors, and taxicab and jingle truck drivers. (A jingle truck is a brightly painted cargo truck whose panels and bumpers are elaborately decorated with chimes, bells, and other ornaments.)

The meeting allowed us to gain a better understanding of how the local economy functioned. It was also a useful tool for pressuring local officials to respond to the complaints of business leaders. Eventually, it became a monthly event, with members of the provincial council and parliament attending, and it gained the support of the Afghanistan International Chamber of Commerce, which offered advice and financial assistance. Engaging with the local community, identifying community needs, and facilitating the creation of institutions to represent local interests are the kinds of work that can often be best done by a DOS civilian. Though not often viewed as the type of activity considered integral to a successful counterinsurgency strategy (bolstering indigenous security forces and the local government being the usual means), the creation of a viable civil society that can improve living conditions and government responsiveness is a useful supplement to kinetic operations.

## Improving Governance

Because local leaders are sometimes more willing to speak with a civilian than a member of the U.S. military, I was often able to gain a better understanding of tribal disputes, personal animosities, and local government functions than my military colleagues. This enabled me to help the military increase its situational awareness; to keep coalition forces from being dragged into tribal or personal disputes; and to assist in identifying insurgents in the general population. Such information was especially useful to Uruzgan's PRT during the fall 2005 provincial council and parliamentary elections. By talking with local officials, I determined who had

relatives in government; what the tribal affiliations and home districts of all provincial council and parliamentary candidates were, as well as some of their personal histories; whether they supported the governor or the police chief (the two major political figures of the province); and whether they had been members of the Taliban or the Communist Party in the 1970s to early 1990s. Consequently, I was able to give the SF a political overview of the province, one that helped security elements ensure that rival candidates didn't attack one another and that kept us from being drawn into factional disputes. This information was also useful in assessing whether the candidates were broadly representative of the community and what capacity they might have at good governance. After September's election, I was able to use this information to work with the newly elected officials to improve local governance.

I also conducted a formal assessment of the provincial government's directorates (which are the local government agencies for the host government's central ministries). I interviewed each of the directors about his personnel, resources, and policies while evaluating his individual abilities to lead. Because of these assessments, we were better able to determine whether good governance was taking place and better able to direct the development spending priorities of the PRT, the U.S. Army's civil affairs team, and USAID. By working with local officials and integrating them into our civil affairs missions, the PRT improved the officials' ability to govern and their directorates' capacity to function while better focusing the PRT's reconstruction and development projects. The PRT worked with these officials to develop their long-range planning, help them prioritize their projects, and facilitate their connections to the ministries of the central government. Eventually, these assessments enabled me to make pragmatic recommendations to the embassy, and thus to the government of Afghanistan, about which officials should be removed for incompetence or corruption and how to better direct the spending of limited development resources to improve local governance. As my experience illustrates, these formal assessments had the collective effect of getting the local government to work more effectively, thereby making it a viable institution for the community. A DOS employee is uniquely suited to enable this crucial complement to kinetic operations.

## The Way Ahead

As David Galula pointed out, in a counterinsurgency, units that take part in large-scale military operations will have to perform a myriad of nonmilitary tasks to win the support of the population. When there is a shortage of civilian political and administrative personnel, “making a thorough census, enforcing new regulations on movements of persons and goods, informing the population, conducting person-to-person propaganda, gathering intelligence on the insurgent’s political agents, implementing the various economic and social reforms, etc.—all these will become their primary activity. . . . Thus, a mimeograph machine may turn out to be more useful than a machine gun, a soldier trained as a pediatrician more important than a mortar expert, cement more wanted than barbed wire, clerks more in demand than riflemen.”<sup>6</sup> If we have sufficient DOS personnel—experts in political and administrative matters—to perform such tasks, soldiers would be free to perform essential military functions.

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from Galula

Identifying, training, and staffing military units with DOS personnel is a significant challenge—but not an impossible one. Like much of the U.S. Army before transformation, the DOS is organized to operate in a world of nation-states. We must make a second, complementary, effort to put diplomats in the field to help combat a global insurgency that does not recognize national borders. The ongoing difficulty of staffing PRTs in Afghanistan and Iraq with POLADs underscores the problems the foreign service faces in staffing a worldwide counterinsurgency effort.

Placing DOS personnel on PRTs is a first step toward integrating a diplomatic approach into counterinsurgency efforts. The next step should be placing DOS personnel with as many deployed military units in post-conflict *and* conflict situations as possible, so

that their diplomatic training might benefit the overall effort. Although I was ostensibly charged with working for the PRT of Uruzgan Province, I also had the good fortune of being collocated with the command element of an SF unit at the forward operating base. My advice and the relationships I had developed with local leaders helped SF leaders understand many provincial issues, including tribal, factional, and personal relationships. If the DOS could, as a start, attach one of its employees to the command element of each globally deployed SF unit, our counterinsurgency effort would improve considerably.

Unfortunately, the foreign service is not well structured to man PRTs with the right kind or required number of personnel; therefore, attaching DOS employees to conventional and SF units in the field will be an even more difficult task for the personnel system.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, I recommend that SOCOM agree, on a trial basis, to create 10 slots for DOS personnel to deploy with SF units throughout the world. (This would be similar to the arrangement that pairs a POLAD with each regional combatant commander). In conjunction with SOCOM, the DOS would identify its personnel and place them in these 10 slots. DOS employees would undergo a stripped-down version of military training to ensure they meet some basic physical requirements, have a degree of weapons proficiency, and acquire a basic knowledge of military operations. Each DOS employee would join an SF team as it prepared for deployment, stay with it during its entire deployment, and upon completion of the tour work at SOCOM as a POLAD. Over time, these personnel would move into leadership positions at SOCOM, in embassies, in the civil service (in such places as the Political-Military Bureau and the Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism), and in the foreign service.<sup>8</sup> These kinds of tours would not just be a brief interlude from a normal foreign service career path; rather, they would be part of a dedicated profession in which DOS personnel work with SOCOM and make counterinsurgency work in conflict and post-conflict situations a career.

The United States should create a separate service called the Diplomatic Field Service (DFS) that would largely consist of DOS civil service members supplemented by foreign service personnel on rotation. Foreign service officers outside the DFS would have the opportunity to work in the DFS with the expectation

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that most employees of the service would progress in this specific line of work during their careers. If the trial program is successful, it could be expanded into conventional forces, and SOCOM could create more slots for DOS employees. In some respects, the DOS has already recognized the need for an expanded civilian component in post-conflict situations similar in mission to that explained above. The Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS) already envisions a version, similar to the ideas presented earlier, of a deployable civilian corps to “guide post-conflict efforts.” My proposal is slightly different in the following ways, not only from what S/CRS would like, but from what we usually expect of our POLADs. First, it envisions DOS personnel actually working in conflict situations, not just post-conflict situations, and serving solely with military units as opposed to being members of a robust interagency PRT or civilian corps.<sup>9</sup> Second, instead of functioning as a reserve component that would be called upon when needed, the DFS would work in the field of counterinsurgency full time, with its officers undertaking a clearly defined career path. And finally, instead of being solely a reporting officer, a DFS POLAD would be actively engaged in the local political scene, facilitating and coordinating programs and policies that would further the goals of the U.S. Government and the host nation.

## **Conclusion**

Counterinsurgency efforts will continue to be a major component of national security planning,

with the DOS having a unique and crucial role to play in these efforts. PRTs in Afghanistan and Iraq have already demonstrated that a DOS employee can add immense value to stability operations by facilitating reconstruction, improving governance, and increasing security. By working to build local government institutions, improve public administration and governance, and provide political leadership and advice, DOS personnel can add enormous value to counterinsurgency efforts in conflict situations as well. Attaching DOS personnel to PRTs is the first step to incorporating diplomatic specialists into post-conflict situations. Assigning DOS personnel to combat units and letting them serve with U.S. military forces as they conduct military operations is the logical extension of this concept. This type of tactical and operational diplomacy is vital to winning the counterinsurgency fight, particularly because most of the elements of a successful counterinsurgency strategy are non-kinetic. Policy makers should recognize the value of this new approach and take appropriate steps to make the DOS a more central player in our efforts to defeat global terrorism. **MR**

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## **NOTES**

1. David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Praeger, 1964; reprint, 2006), 4-5.

2. Bay Fang, “A ‘Reluctant Warrior’ in Iraq,” *U.S. News & World Report*, 9 January 2006, 18.

3. Paul De La Garza, “Special Ops’ Expanding Role,” *St. Petersburg Times*, 24 September 2005.

4. *Ibid.*

5. On 11 January 2007, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stated before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the number of provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) in Iraq would increase from 10 to at least 18 in the coming year.

6. Galula, 66.

7. PRTs are just one aspect of the civilian-military environment that will necessitate transformation of the Department of State (DOS). The DOS is considering ways to help the entire Foreign and Civil Service become a more flexible, expeditionary entity.

8. DOS employees should also have a voice at the senior, strategic level at the Department of Defense and SOCOM to ensure that military operations are planned with sufficient knowledge of the broader political environment in the region and so that special and conventional forces can coordinate and leverage civilian tools of government as far as possible.

9. The Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization envisions advance civilian teams, or ACTs, embedding with the military at division or brigade level to begin reconstruction and stabilization activities as soon as possible. They could remain attached to the military unit or break off when conditions call for or allow a decentralized presence.