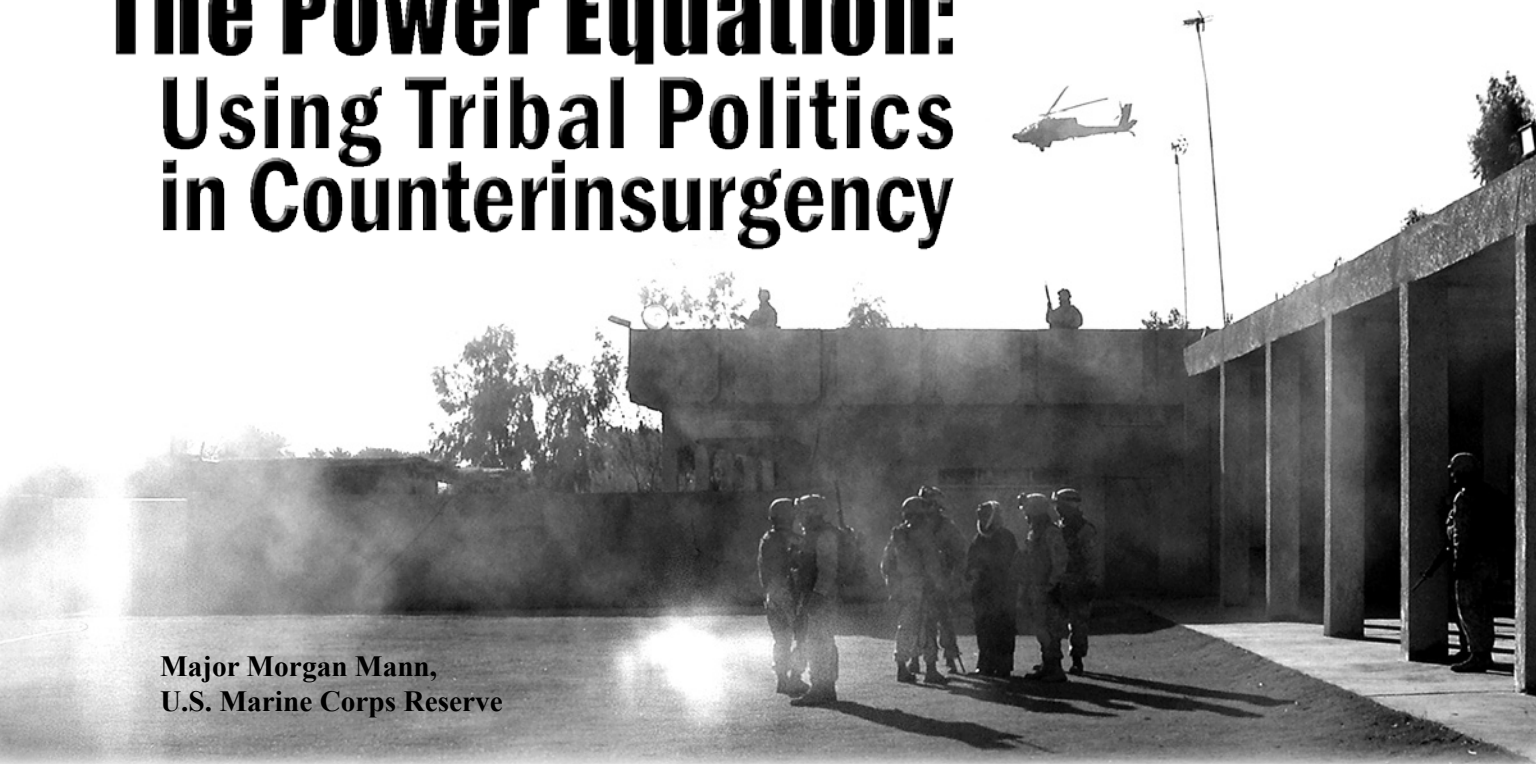


The Power Equation: Using Tribal Politics in Counterinsurgency



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PHOTO: The author, with an interrogation team, questions the grand sheik of the Caragoul tribe after Marines found anti-coalition propaganda in his house, January 2005, near Yusufiyah.

(All photos courtesy of the author)

FOUR SHORT YEARS AGO, the sheik standing beside me clothed in a fine wool *dishdasha* robe had received yearly patronage from Saddam Hussein's political machine, doled money out to his tribe as he saw fit, and, as his father had before him, maintained his family's power in the tribe. Through his contacts and tribal alliances, he ensured that the men of his tribe had jobs or commissions in the army, that their children were accepted into good schools, and that their families got more than their fair share of government subsidies.

In March 2003, with the toppling of Saddam's regime, the sheik's power relationships changed. When the corruption and terror of Saddam's dictatorship ended, so did the informal networks it had used and supported. The sheik could no longer dole out money. His ability to influence, coerce, and condemn declined. With his power nearly gone and an American-led coalition seemingly the reason for his loss, the sheik allowed his tribe to participate in the growing insurgent movement.

The area in which the sheik lived was the most dangerous in our zone. We expected regular mortar, rocket, and IED attacks. Then one day in January 2005, an Apache helicopter hovered over the courtyard of the sheik's home, pointing its 30-millimeter chain gun at him. Marines were searching the sheik's house. His two sons sat blindfolded in the back of a truck, waiting to be sent to a detention facility, while I arrested him for being a financier and coordinator of insurgent activity in my area of operations (AO).

Three weeks later, we released the sheik. He had agreed to stop attacks from inside his tribal boundaries, and in return, I would facilitate several construction contracts and notify him of which men I had targeted for detention. Five weeks after the sheik's initial arrest, attacks from his tribal area ceased. What had once been the most dangerous area in my zone became one of the safest.

What Changed and Why?

The events above occurred between Fox Company, 2d Battalion, 24th Marines, and the Caragoul tribe in an AO of 150-square-kilometers centered in the town of Yusufiyah, located 15 miles south of Baghdad in North Babil, Iraq. The Caragoul tribal area ran 10+ miles along the western side of the Euphrates River from Sadr al Yusufiyah to the town of Lutafiyah. Lush farmland, a large canal network, and numerous small villages and hamlets blanketed the terrain. The area had also been the site of the headquarters of a Republican Guard division and two large ammunition manufacturing and storage facilities. The Caragoul tribe was Sunni; however, the population in the larger company zone was 60 percent Sunni and 40 percent Shi'a.

Almost all of the operations Fox Company planned and the enemy activity it responded to were occasioned by three of the seven tribes in Fox's AO. The Caragoul, the focus of this story, were the primary coordinators and financiers of insurgent activity. The Janabi tribe were mainly low-level fighters and concentrated close to the company's forward operating base in Yusufiyah. The Janabi were our first target. Upon initiating offensive operations in our area, we detained many of their young adult males. Our aggressive action suppressed much of the Janabi's insurgent activity in our zone. The third "enemy" tribe, the Zobai, were dispersed, with their tribal leadership based outside our zone. They remained regular belligerents throughout our tour.

Our success was a direct result of our ability to exercise power across a continuum, thereby demonstrating that we had ample military and political resources and commitment. For three months we targeted the tribes persistently with cordon-and-searches, vehicle checkpoints, and battalion-size operations. As the number and pace of our operations increased, so did our number of insurgent detainees. The increase led to more accurate and timely intelligence, which in turn enabled the targeting of even more insurgents. Thanks to counter-mortar radar tracking, we quickly answered mortar fire from the tribal zone with our 81-mm mortars and 155-mm howitzers. We also targeted known mortar positions for observed harassment fire. Illumination at random intervals created uncertainty among the insurgents and fear of possible house searches and detentions.

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Taken together, these actions fostered an understanding that the Marines of Fox Company were willing and able to use every instrument at their disposal to kill their enemies and disrupt insurgent activity. Because we demonstrated that we would use targeted violence whenever necessary, tribal attacks on Marines decreased and intelligence about the enemy increased. Soon, we were able to broker truces with the formerly hostile tribes.

Of course, the use of lethal force is not the only means of demonstrating power. There were benefits to cooperating with us or even just remaining neutral. The Caragoul saw these benefits in tribal areas adjacent to their own. We hired local contractors for road repair, sewage clean-up, and reconstruction projects. Utilities operated. Village markets thrived. Schools stayed open. There were fewer insurgent attacks and fewer Marine offensive actions in surrounding communities. Most important, successful elections on 30 January 2005 showed that the government could carry out a political process that the insurgents violently opposed.

In short, we presented the Caragoul tribal leaders with a clear choice: either participate in or at least countenance a legitimate political process, or work outside the process and support the ongoing insurgent attacks on American forces. Based on their experience interacting with U.S. Marines for three months, the Caragoul knew that fighting did not deter their enemy; it just brought more destruction, more deaths or detentions, and further loss of power. In addition, the successful elections voided their argument that there was no Iraqi forum to redress their supposed grievances.

The Caragoul tribal leadership recognized that coalition forces could and would take decisive action along a power continuum ranging from the use of deadly violence to economic and social incentives. Because of our combined use of violence, economic

power, and political force, the sheik and his tribe chose to become a part of the political process instead of fighting against it from the outside. Thus a viable political venue arising in the form of a democratic-like process, in conjunction with the lever of our willingness to conduct ongoing offensive operations, put our enemy on the horns of a dilemma. The sheik's second in command expressed this thought process to me directly. It was at that point that we agreed to assemble all of the Caragoul tribal leadership at the invitation of the brigade combat team commander.

At that meeting we agreed to release the sheik in exchange for the tribe's agreement to no longer support enemy activity. Reconstruction projects were identified and would be committed to based on the tribe's ongoing ability to eliminate attacks from their area. We always maintained the option to resume offensive operations as aggressively as before. Subsequent to the meeting, attacks from the Caragoul area dropped over 50 percent.

Fighting Smart

Understanding tribal organization and leadership is critical to success in rural Iraq. Unlike major urban areas, rural areas still depend on tribes to facilitate jobs, coordinate services, and generally improve the quality of life. Tribal affiliation transcends religion, and tribal leaders exact more loyalty than Shi'a or Sunni clerics. Some tribes fight the coalition presence, while others are neutral or cooperate with it. We must make every effort to understand an area's tribal alignment and disposition in order to focus the appropriate combat, economic, and political power needed to defeat the tribe or change its position regarding the coalition.

To paraphrase General John Abizaid, "Americans like to fight then talk, while Arabs like to fight and talk." We must recognize that fighting a tribe today does not make the tribe our enemy for life. We must be willing to talk over lunch with tribal leaders whom we know tacitly support enemy activity, then kill or capture any of them who attack us or are complicit in enemy activity. Talking and negotiating are not signs of weakness provided the enemy



Caragoul men being moved to a screening area for possible detention, village of Arab Jassim, North Babil province, February 2005.

knows we will continue to use all the power at our disposal to achieve our aims. However, if tribes predisposed to fight think we use negotiation as a substitute for force, they will continue to fight while taking advantage of negotiation to achieve their aims at our expense.

Just as we develop a combined obstacle overlay when analyzing terrain and enemy mechanized movement, we must develop an overlay to understand tribal influence in the AO. Overlays should display tribe names, boundaries, and dispositions, and indicate which tribes dominate in the AO. Once we understand the tribal relationships in our area, we can leverage our power in the tribal environment. We must collect names, tribal affiliations, photos, and home grid coordinates of all males in the area and meticulously record the information in appropriate computer databases. This will enable future pattern analysis to detect changes in tribal disposition and individual movements within and across the AO. By managing this information at the company level and correlating tribal overlays with enemy activity, commanders can gain a better understanding of the tribal political landscape. They will be able to do more effective, more timely tactical planning that meets broader coalition objectives with less fighting and greater local support.

Companies and battalions should exercise all the elements of power at their disposal, including political, economic, and combat power. Success in

winning trust and cooperation (or defeating a tribe in combat) will not come as a result of division- or corps-level operations. When we exercise deadly force within the Multinational Force-Iraq rules of engagement, we must push decision making down to as low a level as possible. At the same time, we must give the lowest level commander in charge of a village or tribal area the authority to grant civil affairs contracts, distribute cash, and employ civilians. Without the power to dispense economic incentives, units have “sticks” but very few “carrots.” To ensure that tribes understand just how powerful we are, our units must be able to fight aggressively and reward commensurately.

Some might say that determining the appropriate mix of political, economic, and military force is a task for policy makers, the State Department, or provisional reconstruction teams (PRTs), not company commanders. However, our local commanders are similar to big-city aldermen in the United States; that is, they are like junior politicians with the resources and power at their disposal to remove trash, fix roads, approve new zoning, and develop abandoned lots. Like an alderman, the local commander is familiar enough with his area to know what tactics or projects will yield the best results. Company commanders must become owners of the process in their AOs. They must also use the coercive dimension of power, including deadly force and offensive operations, when necessary.

Tribal leaders know full well that centralized decision making reduces the power of the local military commander and the effectiveness of local political and economic programs. We can continue to centralize high-demand, low-density resources such as civil affairs teams, but we must allow for decentralized planning and execution in the use of those resources.

Provisional reconstruction teams appear to be effective in some areas. PRTs do not, however, have the maneuver and firepower needed to coerce insurgents in provinces where violence is still high. We must display the two faces of power. We must be the benevolent provider as well as the steadfast

warrior. Organizations with the resources to exhibit both faces of power will defeat the enemy and maintain tribal loyalty.

The Power Continuum

Power in Iraq is dispensed from across a continuum of possibilities. At one extreme is the killing of a person or persons to achieve a political or military end, such as eliminating or intimidating an enemy, exacting revenge, or inducing fear in a population. The use of deadly force is an ultimate and irreversible act, one that defines who has more power in a given situation. At the other extreme is an act of great generosity or respect to achieve some political end. Examples are building schools, opening free medical clinics, or treating a sheik’s son for a disease. In between these two extremes, there are many options available for achieving desired ends, including cordon-and-search raids, detention and release of individuals, asset seizure, letting of civil affairs contracts, and provision of public services.

Tribal sheiks (and Arab leaders in general) understand the concept of a continuum of power. They are comfortable with “talking and fighting” and “killing and helping.” This does not mean that American fighting forces should throw away the laws of war, the rules of engagement, the Uniform Code of Military Justice, and American values and behavior.



All the sheiks of the Caragoul tribe, assembled at the author’s request, discuss their grand sheik’s release in exchange for cooperation with Fox Company, March 2005.

as though they were members of a tribe. Rather, we must understand how Iraqi tribes think about the use of power and be willing to use whatever power is at our disposal so long as we do not cross the legal and ethical lines we set for ourselves.

The effective use of power requires the willingness to use it. Our actions must be within the Laws of Armed Conflict, yet we must be willing to use deadly force when justified, ensure we use it in a surgical and measured way, and be unapologetic about our use of it. Deadly force is something Arab tribes understand, but something we Americans are uncomfortable with.

We must see power as a continuum. We have to hold tribes accountable for hostile actions that occur within their boundaries. We should not tolerate attacks, and we must speak plainly to tribal leaders regarding the consequences of supporting the enemy and the benefits of cooperating with the coalition. Our willingness to enforce our expectations of hostile tribes through the judicious use of power will determine whether they respect us and obey our wishes or cast aside our demands in the belief that their actions carry no consequences.

Recommendations

The U.S. military sometimes lives in a black-and-white world of its own making. Its institutions reward obedience over creativity, and risk avoidance over risk taking. We look at the world through a Western cultural lens that does not allow us to see the complexities of tribal hierarchies and loyalties. To improve, we must continue to foster small-unit leader initiative and acknowledge that different situations require the use of different types of force. We must create training that teaches Soldiers how to make decisions in ambiguous environments. Our company commanders must be comfortable working in a world with many shades of grey.

Military institutions have to abandon the belief that “small wars” are the exception and not the rule. Despite Napoleon’s views on the supreme importance of decisive battles and our desire to fight

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them, there have been very few such battles in the history of American warfare. Small wars are the norm and have always been so. To achieve victory in counterinsurgency, particularly in tribal societies, we must blend the use of political, economic, and military power as if we were synchronizing combined arms at the tactical level.

Infantry officer courses and intermediate-level professional military education schools must incorporate courses on negotiating skills into their programs of instruction. Because tribal leaders are often expert negotiators, company commanders must be well prepared to win across the meeting table as well as on the unconventional battlefield. Cultural awareness means more than just being sensitive to a community. It is a component of the intelligence preparation of the battlefield and a capability that can help us achieve our objectives.

Conclusion

Knowing how to operate in an environment of tribal power relationships is critical to successful counterinsurgency operations. To better achieve our tactical and operational goals as a fighting force, our company and battalion commanders must better understand how to interact with the tribes in their AOs. They must also have the skills and resources—the political, economic, and combat power—needed to achieve their objectives. Sheiks and tribes must never doubt that in our pursuit of freedom’s goals, we will avail ourselves of the entire continuum of power. **MR**