

The Role of Empathy

IN IRREGULAR WARFARE

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JOINT PUBLICATION 3-0, *Joint Operations*, has added “restraint,” “perseverance,” and “legitimacy” to the nine principles of war recognized by doctrine since 1949.¹ Of the three additions, legitimacy is the most salient to irregular warfare. Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, notes: “Political power is the central issue in insurgencies and counterinsurgencies; each side aims to get the people to accept its governance or authority as legitimate.”² FM 3-24 uses the word legitimacy 83 times and states, “Legitimacy is the main objective [of counterinsurgency].”³ For counterinsurgency and in the broader context of irregular warfare, the seminal question is how to gain and maintain legitimacy.



Legitimacy and Irregular Warfare

To understand legitimacy we must consider its opposite, illegitimacy. One chief cause of government illegitimacy is widespread oppression and injustice. Consequently, past leaders of successful insurgencies have exploited injustices to gain popular support. For example, Mao Tse Tung, leader of the Chinese Communists during the Chinese Civil War, contends, “Guerrilla operations...are the inevitable result of the clash between oppressor and oppressed, when the latter reach the limits of their endurance.”⁴ Mao admonished his revolutionaries to preserve the people’s trust, telling his guerrillas there are three rules of war:

- All actions are subject to command;
- Do not steal from the people;
- Be neither selfish nor unjust.”⁵

We need to look no further than to the leaders of successful insurgencies from the past century to see legitimacy’s importance to success. Ho Chi Minh invoked the U.S. Declaration of Independence and the French Revolution’s “Rights of Man” in declaring Vietnam independent from France in 1945. He claimed, “For more than 80 years, the French imperialists, abusing the standard of liberty, equality, and fraternity, have violated our Fatherland and oppressed our fellow citizens. They have acted contrary to the ideals of humanity and justice.”⁶

Joint Publication 3-0 hints at legitimacy’s fundamental characteristic: “Legitimacy is based on the legality, morality, and rightness of the actions undertaken.”⁷ If morality and rightness of actions are legitimacy’s foundation, then understanding the peoples’ perspective is fundamental to sound operational

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PAINTING: “The Good Samaritan,” Vincent Willem van Gogh, 1890.

design and planning for irregular warfare. According to COIN doctrine, the proper point of departure is to first gain an understanding of the operational environment, including its people and social and cultural phenomena.⁸ FM 3-0 now acknowledges this point as well, recently adding “understanding” as the first element of battle command.⁹

Operationalizing Empathy

Empathy can be a vital attribute for Soldiers engaged in counterinsurgency operations. Since legitimacy depends on “morality and rightness,” having a normative moral principle helps fill the gap between doctrine and its implementation. Merely stating the importance of “understanding” does not guarantee its attainment. Understanding is incomplete unless it fully considers the other’s perceptions, which requires empathetic projection. One fully reaches a true understanding of the *other*, the alter ego, by incorporating the totality of the other person’s “*givenness*.” These imperatives are inherent in the so-called Golden Rule.

Although usually associated with the Christian ethic, the Golden Rule actually predates Christianity, originating in the West among the ancient Greek and Roman cultures.¹⁰ It was known by virtually the whole of Greek and Roman antiquity and familiar to Herodotus and Antiphon the Sophist in the 5th century BCE.¹¹ In the 4th century CE, the Golden Rule was a part of Aristotle’s endoxa, or the common wisdom of Athens.¹² From Greece, it spread throughout the founding cultures of the Western World. Meanwhile in the East, the Chinese had articulated their own version of this rule of reciprocity as part of orthodox Confucianism.

Paul Ricoeur examines the Golden Rule through the lens of philosophy and finds it superior to Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative because of its anthropological dimension of solicitude, or caring.¹³ Kant’s maxim (human beings must always be treated as an ends and never as a means) falls short of com-

prising full consideration of the other’s perspective. The Golden Rule (“Treat others as you would like them to treat you”) is a better moral formula because it adds an implicit empathetic demand.¹⁴ Ricoeur claims that the Golden Rule “represents the simplest formula that can serve as a transition between solicitude and the second Kantian imperative.”¹⁵ For Ricoeur, what the rule has that Kant’s formula lacks is an “intuition of genuine otherness.”¹⁶

Empathy in Army Doctrine

Army doctrine acknowledges empathy as a tool for achieving legitimacy. Field Manual 6-22, *Army Leadership*, defines empathy as “the ability to see something from another person’s point of view, to identify with and enter into another person’s feelings and emotions.”¹⁷ With respect to empathy and legitimacy, the FM states that empathy is useful to win the support of a population: “Within the larger operational environment, leader empathy may be helpful when dealing with local populations and prisoners of war. Providing the local population within an area of operations with the necessities of life often turns an initially hostile disposition into one of cooperation.”¹⁸ Thus, a given population’s disposition toward “cooperation” is closely linked to empathy. However, in order to have true empathy, military members must first accept inhabitants as human beings with equal dignity.

Empathy is necessary to gain a true understanding of the operational environment. Empathetic thinking allows commanders to discern how to act in a manner that is moral and socially acceptable. In irregular warfare, “right” actions are pragmatic because they build legitimacy and avoid injustice. When derived from an authentic understanding of the population, actions universally viewed as “right” can win the confidence of the governed and lead to legitimacy. Therefore, a single rule serves as a useful guideline for building legitimacy: “Treat the population as you would want yourself to be treated.” Another formulation often argued to be even superior to this would be: “Do not treat the population in a way you yourself would not want to be treated.”

If legitimacy is the supreme principle of irregular warfare, and if a true understanding of the civilian population is the foundation for achieving it, then success in operational design and military planning for irregular warfare depends on empathetic reflection. **MR**

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NOTES

1. See U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 2008), Appendix A and U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2008), Appendix A.
2. FM 3-24, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2006), 1-1.
3. FM 3-24, 1-21.
4. Mao Tse-Tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, 2d ed., trans., Samuel B. Griffin II (Baltimore, MD: The Nautical & Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1992), 69.
5. *Ibid.*, 112.
6. Ho Chi Minh, "Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam" in *Ho Chi Minh, On Revolution: Selected Writings, 1920-66*, ed. Bernard B. Fall (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1967), 143.
7. JP 3-0, *Joint Operations*, A-4 (2008)
8. See FM 3-24, 3-3.
9. See FM 3-0, *Operations*, 2008, figure 5-1.
10. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Where Does Fidelity Dwell?" *Communio* (Winter 2007): 500.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Paul Ricoeur, *The Just*, trans., David Pellauer (IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 53.
13. See Ricoeur, 56. For the second Kantian imperative, see Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. T.K. Abbott (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1987), 58.
14. Ricoeur, 53. The Golden Rule is contained in the Christian Bible (see Luke 6:31 and Matthew 7:12).
15. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 222.
16. *Ibid.*, 225.
17. FM 6-22, *Army Leadership* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2006), 4-9.
18. *Ibid.*, 4-10.



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