(Photo courtesy of U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School PAO)

A Special Forces student considers options 15 September 2010 during the Robin Sage exercise, which is conducted within 15 North Carolina counties. The exercise is held eight times each year as the final test for students attending the Special Forces Qualification Course at the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School.

Deniers of "The Truth"

Why an Agnostic Approach to Warfare is Key

Lt. Col. Grant M. Martin, U.S. Army

I will never forget the day I ate lunch with a retired chaplain and his son in Leavenworth, Kansas in 2008. At one point, an acquaintance of the chaplain walked up to him in the restaurant and shared with him his opinion of the School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS).

"They are deniers of The Truth," he proclaimed, and went on to describe the school's sin: the instructors encouraged students to question their most fundamental beliefs. At the time, I thought it curious that someone would apply a religious attitude to the study of the military arts. After my first few months at the school, however, I realized that as one questioned one's assumptions about the nature of war, it was only natural that one would also start to question other assumptions about life, God, and

everything. Critical thinking was difficult to limit to just one subject.

Amazingly, there were even more officers uncomfortable with questioning their fundamental assumptions about warfare.[1] Today I realize that SAMS could only do so much in introducing different ways to approach the subject. Even after looking into postmodern philosophies, alternative construction of social meaning, and complexity theory and systems thinking, the SAMS curricula could not break away from the demands of the Army in forcing upon us the *technically rational paradigm*.[2] Thus, after studying how complex adaptive systems resist reductionist understanding and deliberate, rational approaches—we launched into the military decision-making process (MDMP), center of gravity analysis, and backwards, intuitive planning.[3]

But why should we approach warfare the same way most of us approach religion? Is it any coincidence that most military officers believe in the technically rational paradigm, even if largely unaware of what it is, much less critically questioning it?

In this article, I will describe an exploratory research effort I participated in to offer a *reflective practice* approach that might better serve our military.[4] This study consisted of observations made during 14 iterations of the U.S. Army Special Forces Qualification Course's Robin Sage exercise for more than a year's time wherein, mostly indeterminantly, I introduced some of the concepts found within design into the planning portion of the training.[5] As my time in command neared an end, I more consciously engaged in conversation with students about some of the concepts behind design. From my viewpoint, I observed a difference between those who had no exposure to design, those who had some exposure, and those who received a little more than some. Of the student teams during the last two iterations of my command, two of them were encouraged to approach their mission planning in a more unstructured manner, and during a class on planning, I engaged with all the officers in a conversation about different planning methods to include design.[6]

My observations, admittedly very subjective and unscientific, follow. My hope is that further experimentation can improve upon the military's use of unstructured approaches to warfare, especially in complex operations such as counterinsurgency, unconventional warfare, and the like. I assert that our religious-like belief in the technically rational paradigm has us wedded to an approach to warfare that seems intuitively effective, but is largely illusory. This study supports the Army Special Operation Forces (ARSOF) 2022 vision as stated by Lt. Gen. Charles T. Cleveland, the U.S. Army Special Operations Command commanding general, in terms of experimenting with different operational art constructs

(Photo courtesy of U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School PAO)

A student performs a training task 15 September 2010 during the Robin Sage exercise. The exercise is conducted as the final test for students attending the Special Forces Qualification Course.

Time Period	Military Decision-Making Process (MDMP)	Army Design Methodology (ADM)	Unstructured Approach
Before Observer's Command	4	1	
During Observer's Command	55	2	7
After Observer's Command			3
Total	59	3	10

Note: Of the seven unstructured teams and 55 MDMP teams during the observer's command period, 29 received a brief introduction to design.

Table 1. Number of Teams Observed by Group

and incorporating the new special operations forces operational design concepts into training and education.[7]

The Experiment

When describing an experiment in social science terms, it does not always follow that a deliberate approach was utilized under clinical conditions. What follows is a collection of observations during the Robin Sage portion of the Special Forces Qualification Course. I define an MDMP team as one that either had no exposure to design or who received no guidance to plan in any way differently than they had already been taught. I define Army design methodology (ADM) teams as those that, during the course of conversations with those teams I received briefings from, the topic of the ADM was inevitably broached. I define the unstructured teams as those teams that I, while roleplaying as their commander, offered guidance to approach their planning in a less structured manner. During my last three classes, I gave a block of instruction on planning, largely due to some insightful conversations I had had with previous teams during commanders' briefbacks. Inevitably the subject of design was broached during this instruction. This last group of teams, therefore, received some formal exposure to design and unstructured approaches. Table 1 shows the number of teams I

The real value of my observations lies in the feedback I received from students and instructors during planning, after planning, and after their training exercise was completed. These observations, casually recorded much later in more of a reflective journal-like manner, were the basis for conclusions I shared during an interview with the Army Research Institute in February 2014. After sharing the conclusions with several others afterwards, I was encouraged to describe and publish my observations and efforts in the words of social science. Thus, it is less important to focus on the methodology of the experiment, as it was decidedly exploratory (and admittedly did not follow the conventional orthodoxy of social science experimentation), and focus rather on preliminary observations that strongly suggest a basis for more controlled and structured future study.

The Control Group: Military Decision-Making Process

To underline the point made in the previous paragraph, there was no control group per se other than the teams I observed that either had no conversation with me about design, or were not encouraged to approach their planning in any other way but through MDMP. As noted in table 1, these were the vast majority of the teams I observed.

The teams that used strict MDMP were more likely to display certain behaviors (discussed in detail below). However, not all teams using MDMP displayed all the noted behaviors, and not all members of these teams displayed the same behavior. On the average, more team members from a greater number of the MDMP teams were more likely to display the following behaviors from my observations.

Five Salient Recurring Patterns Under Conditions in Which Observations Were Made

First, the planning week was normally characterized by the officers spending most of their time building PowerPoint slides. During mealtime, the officers would be huddled in a corner working on computers while the NCOs were away eating. The planning week largely consisted of building products, and little time was spent on rehearsals. The officers would usually copy what was in the higher headquarters' order. Little thinking was spent on the logic behind what the team was instructed to do, or thought they should do, or the logic behind the higher headquarters' objectives. Even worse, the higher headquarters' implicit assertions went largely unquestioned by the team even though the higher headquarters' order pertained to a larger area and provided a more general analysis of the population.

Second, the individuals on the MDMP teams had trouble articulating the logic behind what they were going to do and why. The officers generally accepted the higher headquarters' understanding of the environment as sufficiently correct or, worse, did not even grasp what their higher headquarters assumed about their area of operations. The NCOs, on the other hand, basically had not thought much about their mission at the conceptual level and thus, the intent was unclear in their minds. Typical post-briefing questions by the students were "Can tactical level units use unconventional warfare as their task in their mission statement?" or "Should we use defeat or conduct special operations as our tactical task?" These questions, to me, indicated a focus on trivial subjects and a lack of critical thinking.

Third, the MDMP teams normally briefed 80 or more—sometimes more than 100—PowerPoint slides and spent two hours or longer conducting their briefings. Their intelligence preparation of the

(Photo by Sgt. Derek L. Kuhn, 40th Public Affairs Detachment)

Spc. Brian Kraft, a Special Forces communication sergeant student, looks for better cover during an ambush conducted as part of the Robin Sage exercise, 21 September 2010.

battlefield (IPB) portion was largely a copy of their higher headquarters' IPB, their war-gaming foils (the entity they "war-gamed" their COAs against) were always enemy focused, and the team's three courses of action (COAs) largely revolved around how to organize or lead the guerrillas. Typical war-gamed COAs included: one guerrilla base versus multiple bases, rural insurgency versus urban, and multi-use guerrilla bases versus single-use bases. All teams and the vast majority of members assumed they would have to win the hearts and minds of the people, and that the guerrillas would have to do likewise; that the guerrillas' local interests naturally aligned with those of the larger shadow government; and, that everyone's interests naturally aligned with those of the United States.

Fourth, on average, I found the MDMP teams had the most trouble of all teams in adapting to their reality once they hit the ground. They had more trouble building rapport with the guerrilla chief, more trouble adapting their original plans to the reality, and more trouble figuring out what was going on in their sectors. They were more likely to keep fighting their original plan and to refuse to adjust their incorrect assumptions, even when they discovered evidence to the contrary of their assumptions. On average there was a slightly higher rate of recycle and relief of officers from the MDMP teams, although I suspect this was probably the least rigorous finding of the entire research.[8] The MDMP teams were more likely to spend a longer time getting to more complex training objectives than other teams due to their initial struggles to accomplish simpler ones such as building rapport with the guerrilla chief, completing initial assessments, and figuring out what was motivating the local populace and the guerrilla band and leadership.

Finally, upon completion of the exercise, officers on the MDMP teams were more likely to admit they did not see much value in their planning efforts. The NCOs, however, were generally more than three times as likely to have seen very little value in their planning efforts as those from the other teams. They almost unanimously regretted having spent so much time building PowerPoint slides, not rehearsing much, and not questioning their higher headquarters' operations order.

Five Salient Differences Between the MDMP teams and the Army Design Methodology Groups

First, the ADM teams were more likely than the MDMP teams to include their NCOs in on the conceptual planning portion of their preparation.[9] Since teams were encouraged to build only 10 PowerPoint slides, the ADM teams were more likely to spend more time together during planning. A typical visit to a team found the entire team discussing their sector—usually around a whiteboard or a map. The ADM teams were also more likely to initially question their higher headquarters' assumptions and commander's intent, although they were also normally more likely than the unstructured teams to ultimately adopt their higher headquarters' assumptions and nest their intent with their commander's.

Second, during their briefings, the teams conducting ADM were less likely than the MDMP teams to have trouble articulating the logic of what they thought they were about to do. The NCOs were more likely than those on the MDMP teams to be able to explain in clear language what the concept of their operation was going to be. A typical post-briefing comment and question was, "We noticed some conclusions we had during our design portion kind of got lost when we started into MDMP because they clashed with our higher's order. How do we fix that?"

Third, the ADM teams normally built many more slides than just the twenty they displayed—many had hidden slides that amounted to about 100 slides. Once they initiated MDMP, the training they had received kicked in; they turned to filling out the formatted slides and doing much of their analysis using the product they had to create for their briefings. This meant that the ADM teams did not spend as much time doing rehearsals as the unstructured teams. Once the team started its MDMP, many of the conclusions from the design effort were lost.

Many in the ADM groups admitted it seemed to be a contradictory approach: design encouraged them to build their own understanding of the environment and problem, but when it conflicted with their higher's, they were unsure of what to do. Notably, those teams that looked at their higher headquarters' order before conducting their design effort were more likely to have their design effort match the conclusions of their MDMP.

Because these teams eventually conducted MDMP, the problems associated with the MDMP teams in terms of the IPB, the most likely and most dangerous enemy course of action (COA), and their own three COAs were largely the same. The one area of the MDMP portion in which the ADM teams differed greatly from the MDMP teams was that they were less likely to naturally assume that the population in their sector or the guerrillas would have

(Photo by Sgt Curt Squires, USAJFKSWCS PAO)

John Russell, a civilian volunteer participating in the Special Forces exercise Robin Sage, plans a mission 19 November 2007 with a soldier trying to earn his Green Beret.

interests that nested with their own or that of the shadow government.

Fourth, on average, the ADM teams had less trouble than the MDMP teams in adapting once they infiltrated. On average, most officers reported they had less trouble adapting, but almost the same percentage of NCOs noted trouble with adapting. They were, as a team, less likely to keep fighting their original plan, but most struggled initially (just as the MDMP teams did) to build rapport and do assessments. They were also more likely to spend less time getting to the complex training objectives than the MDMP teams, once that initial struggle was overcome.

Fifth, upon completion of the exercise, officers and NCOs on the ADM teams were more likely to admit they saw some value in their planning efforts, although it was not by much. Most reported struggling with fitting their design efforts into the MDMP. A significant number saw value in the ADM effort in terms of being able to better incorporate the design insights into an MDMP effort in the future.

Five Salient Differences of the Unstructured Group from the MDMP and ADM Groups

The last group was the unstructured group. During planning, this group normally received information from discussions with me on theoretical design that stressed reflexive thinking, situation-unique preparation, and a multi-paradigmatic approach. The teams were instructed to build no more than 10 PowerPoint slides, but preferably none. Most of their briefings were done using only a map and whatever notes they had. They were instructed to rehearse those tasks they knew they would perform, preferably outside of their team room 1-3 hours every day. They were told they could use MDMP, but they were encouraged only to do so for those very specific tasks they knew they would have to accomplish in a relatively short timeframe (infiltration, meeting the guerrilla chief, first twenty-four hours in the guerrilla base, initial assessments, internal communications/dissemination plan, etc.), and to develop their own approach as to how to prepare for the more conceptual parts of the mission. They were encouraged to brief only conclusions during their briefings and allow the more detailed areas to be teased out by the higher commander's interests. Lastly, they were encouraged to disregard everything in their higher's order initially and to always identify unsupported assertions.

The majority of NCOs and officers who used the unstructured approach provided very positive feedback. During the planning week, very little

PowerPoint was used. A typical scene might involve the entire team gathered around a large map and a soldier saying, "If we're thinking transition from day one, then it is going to be important to quickly get an idea of what the locals in this area value and why the guerrillas we are going to be with are fighting—and compare both of those to what our higher is wanting and the U.S. overall wants." The planning week was spent mainly on rehearsals and conversations such as the one above. Very detailed and MDMP-like planning and rehearsals were conducted for the infiltration and initial priorities, but all other preparation was unique to the team and conducted more conceptually. The officers and NCOs consistently questioned the higher headquarters' order and its implicit assertions, especially with respect to their sector and how their sector most likely differed from their higher headquarter's more general characterizations.

(Photo bt Cpt David Chace, USAJFKSWCS PAO)

A special operations medical sergeant student (right) treats a role player during the Robin Sage exercise 2 September 2007 in North Carolina. Robin Sage is the culmination exercise for all Special Forces Qualification Course students.

Second, their briefings consisted of conversations with their higher commanders on the best use of the team's sector in the overall campaign and how they would go about adjusting that use based on changing circumstances and the discovery of false assumptions. Perhaps most impressive, the NCOs were engaged with the higher commander during backbriefs and most were able to articulate the logic behind what the team was planning to do. A typical post-briefing question was, "If our analysis is correct, and we're able to act as a training and supply sector for other areas, at what point do you foresee us possibly shifting to other areas?"

Third, the unstructured teams normally briefed 10 or fewer slides, and their briefings typically lasted less than an hour. Their IPB conclusions were usually different than what their higher headquarters' order asserted, their war-game foils were normally associated with non-enemy entities, and their own COAs were normally built around their infiltration plan. Teams typically assumed that the local populace and guerillas in their sector would have divergent interests from each other, as well as from the United States.

Fourth, for the most part, the unstructured teams had the least trouble of all teams in adapting to the reality on the ground. They anticipated many of the problems they would face, and when other problems cropped up, they were more prepared for them. Perhaps most impressive for these teams was their ability, on average, to get to more complex training objectives quicker than the other groups. Because of their focus on rehearsing in detail for their infiltration, the first twenty-four hours in the guerrilla base, and their initial assessment constructs, these teams typically skipped some of the dilemmas many other teams faced.

Finally, and perhaps most important, after completing the exercise a very high percentage of officers on the unstructured teams believed their planning time had been valuable and had helped them learn faster and adapt more effectively. The NCOs were also more likely than those in the other groups to report that they saw value in their planning.[10] A significant minority of officers did not feel comfortable deviating from what they had been expected

Behavior	MDMP	ADM	Unstructured
Time spent thinking (vice building Powerpoint briefings)	Less	Slightly Less	More
Officers and NCOs together during planning	Less	Slightly Less	More
Rehearsals	Less	Slightly Less	More
Critically reviewing higher's implicit assumptions	Less	Slightly Less	More
Focus on area-specific analyses	Less	Slightly Less	More
Logically connecting objectives with their plan	Less	Slightly Less	More
COA focus on their infiltration (vice number of guerilla bases or the like)	Less	Slightly Less	Slightly More
Adapting once on the ground	Less	Slightly Less	Slightly More
Recycle/ Relief of officers	Slightly More	Slightly Less	Less
Achieving complex training objectives	Less	Slightly Less	Slightly More
Perception of the value of planning	Less	Slightly Less	More
Planning was for everyone (vice only officers)	Less	Slightly Less	More

Table 2. Comparison of Observations

to learn and regurgitate throughout the Special Forces Qualification Course, but the majority did appreciate the chance to think instead of simply regurgitate prior-templated solutions. That all the officers were potentially months away from deploying as commanders of operational Special Forces teams made that point all the more important to me personally.

Table 2 provides a comparison of all three groups.

Conclusion: The Divinity of Doubt

What makes officers in the U.S. Army blindly learn a concept, regurgitate it faithfully, and become complacent about questioning it? I rarely see Special Forces teams outside of the schoolhouse who follow a standard approach to all missions. Mostly what I have seen are teams who naturally fight attempts to tell them how to think about or approach situations. Instead, they look suspiciously at doctrinal templates and higher headquarters' implied assertions.

These informal observations reinforced my own experience: we need to have an agnostic approach to warfare and not be caught up in any one paradigm. The ADP, like MDMP, is just one way of approaching things. Both are largely products of just one paradigm, the technically rational one. This paradigm assumes that the world is like a clock and can be understood by measurement and reductionist methods. *Complexity theory*, another paradigm, asserts that the world is non-linear and therefore

not reductionist. *Systems thinking* implies that measuring complex systems is difficult, if not impossible, rendering quantitative approaches insufficient. *Critical realism* supposes that the world as sensed by humans is predominantly a social construction and thus can be better appreciated only by incorporating multiple viewpoints. I am not advocating any one of these paradigms. I think we should instead utilize a more comprehensive approach: appreciating multiple viewpoints and paradigms.

This, of course, would not replace MDMP, it would simply make MDMP a tool we would use consciously where it makes sense. Likewise, we would not necessarily turn to a technically rational approach to all things, especially warfare.[11] Warfare has to be one of the most social of phenomena in this world; a better approach is to be reflective about ourselves and our processes.

In Victor Bugliosi's book, *Divinity of Doubt*, the author asserts that an agnostic religious approach is more rational.[12] I assert that we should apply his thinking to warfare. We should doubt that our paradigm is right and question assertions to the contrary. Creatively thinking about warfare ought to be encouraged and we must resist institutional attempts to codify how to approach thinking.

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Notes

1. During my time at the School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS), then director Col. Stefan Banach was known to advocate a more unconventional approach to design with themes from postmodernism, systemic operational design, and complexity theory. Later SAMS directors reportedly pulled away from the more conceptual approach to design, ultimately coinciding with the adoption of the term Army design methodology, effectively codifying one method for all situations and tying the approach firmly to the preferred institutional paradigm of technical rationality.

2. Chris Paparone, *The Sociology of Military Science* (New York: Continuum, 2013). The "Technically Rational" paradigm is one that permeates all of the U.S. Army's (and DOD's for that matter) systems, processes, and intellectual approaches to situations. It asserts that all things in the universe can be understood by reductive observation and measurement leading to the discovery of universal principles.

3. The military decisionmaking process (MDMP) is the classic technically rational tool. A higher authority assigns one's unit a list of tasks that are purportedly in support of the higher purpose and that, in aggregation with all other units' tasks, will theoretically lead to the realization of the president's national security objectives.

4. Donald Schon, *The Reflective Practioner* (New York: Basic, 1983). Reflective practice is the ability to reflect on one's actions in order to engage in continuous learning. One cannot learn if one cannot reflect on how one learns.

5. Robin Sage is the final phase of the Special Forces Qualification Course. Ten-twelve student teams of 15-19 soldiers each travel into different areas all over North Carolina and surrounding states, meet up with role-playing guerrillas, and spend their time assisting, advising, and leading them on insurgent missions within a controlled training environment.

6. This was by no means conducted uniformly. During some iterations, there was only one group introduced to operational design, and sometimes none. In a few iterations, all groups were given some exposure to operational design.

7. U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School's Office of Strategic Communication, ARSOF 2022 [U.S. Army Special Operations Command], special edition of *Special Warfare* (Fort Bragg, N.C.: U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School's Office of Strategic Communication, 2013), http://www.specialoperations.org/ARSOF2022_vFINAL%5B1%5D.pdf (accessed 16 December 2014); U.S. Army Special Operations Command, *SOF Campaign Planner's Handbook of Operational Art and Design* (Fort Bragg, N.C., 16 September 2014).

8. The different approaches the teams normally used had something to do with my reading of how open their instructors were to unconventional methods; it cannot be ruled out that certain types of instructors were more likely to recommend officers in general for recycle or relief.

9. The teams that received the Army design methodology concept were not uniformly instructed, not uniformly distributed

throughout the time period, and were the least interacted with in terms of time spent gathering information.

10. Further experimentation must be undertaken as feedback interpreted by one person, especially an advocate of the unstructured approach such as myself, cannot be seen as sufficiently unbiased to scientifically establish firm patterns of differences among groups.

11. The Joint Capabilities Integration & Development System (JCIDS) process, the strategic planning process, and the Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan (JSCP) are all approaches to DOD problems that are wholly reliant on the technically rational paradigm.

12. Vincent Bugliosi, *Divinity of Doubt: The God Question* (New York: Vanguard Press, 2011).

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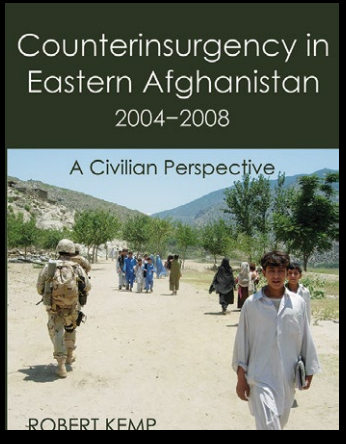

Counterinsurgency in Eastern Afghanistan 2004–2008

A Civilian Perspective

Robert Kemp, published by the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training

After the 2001 ouster of the Taliban from Afghanistan, the United States and its allies found themselves in a country devastated by a series of wars. This book looks at how, working with their Afghan counterparts, they engaged in a complex effort to rebuild security, development, and governance, all while fighting a low-intensity war.

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