



C-17 combat cargo drop over Afghanistan

U.S. Air Force (Brian Ferguson)

On Airpower, Land Power, and Counterinsurgency

Getting Doctrine Right

By JAMES S. CORUM

Since 2001, the U.S. military has been going through a painful process of relearning the art of counterinsurgency. Fighting nonstate forces, be they insurgents, terrorists, or criminals, is a fundamentally different type of war from the state-on-state conventional war to which the Armed Forces are oriented. Getting warfighting right requires an understanding of not only an environment that is far more complex than conventional war but also of a wide variety of organizations, tools, and methods. Airpower is an important tool in counterinsurgency, and the Army/Marine Corps doctrine in Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, lays out some basic guidelines for the employment of airpower in counterinsurgency.

This essay is not about defending the airpower doctrine in FM 3-24. Given the space limitations of the Army/Marine Corps doctrine, which at 267 pages ended up considerably longer than the authors expected, the discussion of the various aspects of military operations in counterinsurgency was kept to basic theory and guidelines. The doctrine was addressed to the strategic planner and operator and was not intended as a guide to the employment of specific technologies and tactics. Indeed, those subjects are better addressed in tactical level manuals. What the doctrine does stress is the need to understand the context of counterinsurgency and how airpower fits into that context.

Back to Basics

In discussing counterinsurgency doctrine, it is best to start with basic principles. By reviewing the dozens of major insurgencies of the last 60 years, we can identify two requirements for the conduct of effective counterinsurgency—and success is not possible without them: good strategy and good intelligence. *Good strategy* is comprehensive, effectively applies all the elements of national power, allows for coordination of those elements, and sets intermediate goals and a realistic endstate. The strategy must be flexible enough to meet changing conditions, and it must be supported by the right kind of civilian and military organizations and personnel.

In a conventional conflict, the military normally has the paramount role. In counterinsurgency, this is not the case. A counterinsurgency strategy that relies overwhelmingly on military forces and military operations—and ignores the social, political, and economic aspects of the insurgency—will not lead to the



Airmen inside Stryker vehicle plan route to targets, Baghdad

U.S. Air Force (Cecilio M. Ricardo, Jr.)

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desired endstate or even close to it. In fighting an insurgency, addressing the political, informational, and economic aspects of the strategy is just as important as the military side. One lesson is emphasized throughout the new Army and Marine Corps counterinsurgency doctrine: the solution may not be a military one.¹ A military approach may kill a lot of insurgents, but unlike conventional war and its focus on fielded forces, killing insurgents is not all that matters. Successful counterinsurgency campaigns are usually concluded with political settlements. To reach a political solution, one needs to deal effectively with the issues driving the insurgency.

The emphasis on the nonmilitary factors of counterinsurgency in a sound strategy means that the military is often a supporting force and not the main effort. This goes against U.S. military culture and that of most Western nations. It also means that airpower is a *supporting* force

training and equipping the Salvadoran armed forces. It was a successful strategy.

In the previous article in this issue, General Charles Dunlap argues that we need to make technology the center of our counterinsurgency strategy. While our technological advantage is a good thing, this route is a false path. An insurgency is a profoundly personal and political endeavor. Counterinsurgency is not about targeting equipment or infrastructure or other things that make airpower so important in conventional war. Counterinsurgency is about human interaction and winning the support of the population. A population cannot be secured; its political, social, and economic concerns cannot be addressed; its forces or its personnel cannot be developed, advised, or trained, from 30,000 feet. The size and type of forces, aid, and personnel deployed to a counterinsurgency campaign should depend upon a careful analysis of the requirements and

to the reality of insurgency. I was present at every author's conference and discussion of the Army/Marine counterinsurgency doctrine, and no one ever said, "How can we view counterinsurgency as a ground-centric kind of conflict?" Counterinsurgency is inherently land-centric because it is about populations, and populations live on the land. As for the comments on jointness, none of the doctrine authors ever argued, "How can we put the U.S. Army or Marines at the center of the counterinsurgency effort?" In fact, Army/Marine doctrine consistently recommends that the best practice is not to have the military be the lead agency for essential counterinsurgency tasks such as building the economy, training police forces, and developing a governmental infrastructure. These tasks are best handled by nonmilitary agencies with special expertise. One of the consistent lessons of good counterinsurgency is that a lot of specialist expertise is needed to succeed. For example, chapter 6 of FM 3-24 specifically recommends that the ideal for training police forces is to have civilian and international agencies lead the effort, with the U.S. Army Military Police acting in a supporting role.²

Arguments for airmindedness, or advocacy of a high-tech approach, seem to be a Pentagon style of thinking that tries to fit insurgency into a type of warfighting that leaders feel most comfortable with. But insurgency has to be approached on its own terms. There are a lot of roles for high-tech weaponry in counterinsurgency, and there are many ways that airpower might be profitably used. In fact, Wray Johnson and I wrote a 500-page book on the latter subject.³ But I have yet to see any instance in which a nation could make airpower or high-tech weaponry central to an effective counterinsurgency strategy (that is, one that meets the needs of a population).

The Army and Marine Corps had only one consideration in writing the counterinsurgency doctrine: what works. If we are to craft sound counterinsurgency strategies, we need to get away from the Service advocacy culture and be ready to take a broad, even *unmilitary*, view of things. If a careful analysis of a specific insurgency concludes that the most effective means to defeat insurgents would be to deploy a corps of psychiatric social workers, then I would advocate that we do whatever is necessary to stand up the best corps of deployable psychiatric social workers in the world. And when we deploy them, the Army will be a supporting force providing security, and the Air Force will provide the airlift.

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and not the main thrust. This is not to say that the military effort and the employment of airpower are not important, but it does mean that we have to consider the role of military force and more specifically airpower within a broad and complex political context. An effective strategy might focus on the economic, social, or political issues—and most likely a combination of the three. In combating the insurgency in El Salvador from 1981 to 1992, 80 percent of the U.S. funding and effort went into economic aid to that country while 20 percent went into

circumstances of the campaign. We should not place artificial restrictions on force levels at the start of the conflict based on unproven theories and optimistic projections. Wars of whatever type and intensity always end up costing more in personnel and resources than a nation expects at the beginning. If we make a rigid rule that a war must be fought with minimum manpower and at minimum cost, we are bound to get in trouble.

The critique that Army and Marine doctrine is focused on land power is not relevant



U.S. Air Force (Jeffrey A. Wolfe)

Troops on the Ground

General Dunlap questions the importance of boots on the ground in counterinsurgency. He argues that the manpower-intensive approach to counterinsurgency is due to Army tradition and that the suggested ratio of troops to civilians is based on “questionable assumptions.” In fact, the doctrinal requirement to put plenty of troops on the ground at the start of a stability operation, or in conditions of high violence, is based on recent experience in Somalia (1992–1994), Bosnia (1995), and Kosovo (1999). A primary requirement of counterinsurgency is establishing order and controlling the population, and we need to be on the ground to do that. If a basic level of security is not established, then humanitarian assistance, reconstruction programs, and the establishment of a civil society are impossible. In Bosnia and Kosovo, the large number of troops put on the ground relative to the total population quickly established order and ensured that the civilian administrators could begin reconstruction. In Somalia, the large force sent in at the onset quieted the southern half of the country. Only when most of the U.S. forces were withdrawn, and the United Nations (UN) force was left with little combat power, did Mohammed Aidede initiate his war against the American and UN forces that culminated in the battle for Mogadishu in October 1993.

If there is any lesson that ought to come from the Iraq war, it is the importance of establishing a basic level of security for the population. A lot of manpower is needed to do that. In 2003, we tried to establish order in a country of 25 million with only 130,000 troops, an absurdly low number to do the job. As a result, the postwar looting, crime, and disorder continued. A minimum level of security was never established for a large part of the population that suffered through the wave of murder, kidnappings, and other illegal behavior. Some argue that the presence of U.S. troops is a negative, and a heavy American or foreign presence provokes the population to resistance. If this were true, then the violence in Bosnia and Kosovo would have escalated with the intervention of a large outside force. In fact, the opposite happened in those countries. It is true that U.S. and coalition forces provoked the resentment of many Iraqis, but it was because there were too few coalition troops to establish a secure environment and stop the ongoing disorder. Our initial failure to establish order in Iraq crippled the reconstruction efforts and allowed the insurgency to flourish.

As General Dunlap points out, and as Wray Johnson and I have argued, airpower is a great force enhancer in counterinsurgency warfare; it enables coalition and government forces to use their resources much more effectively—but it still cannot replace strong and visible forces on the ground to control and protect the population.

Intelligence and Counterinsurgency

The role of intelligence in counterinsurgency is fundamentally different from its role in conventional war. Conventional military intelligence is about looking for things we can see and count. Thanks to modern technology, with its signals intelligence and the ability to monitor the battlefield by space and aerial surveillance, the primary mission of intelligence in conventional war—locating the enemy’s main conventional forces—is relatively easy. High-tech intelligence assets are featured in

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conventional war operations: space, reconnaissance, and signal assets. In counterinsurgency, the first mission of the intelligence agencies is to understand the *context* of the conflict, which means collecting information about the whole society, understanding local conditions, monitoring public opinion, and analyzing social and political relationships and networks. And that is just the start. The next step is to find the insurgent and try to understand his organization.

This is difficult because the insurgent is likely to wear civilian clothes and hide in the population. He will have a local and perhaps national organization—and it is all underground. If we are lucky, the insurgent will stand and fight and give the counterinsurgent the chance to use military force and airpower against him. But even if we decimate insurgent combatant forces, they will quickly revive if we do not break the underground support network.

The kind of intelligence we need to understand the insurgent social context and the insurgent organization is human intelligence (HUMINT). Of course, high-tech assets have a role. Space surveillance and other reconnaissance tools can give us great data. High-tech surveillance can tell us that the people are all leaving a particular village. But it does not tell us *why* they are leaving. We need highly effective intelligence analysts to do that. Airpower, or military power, is of little use in counterinsurgency without the kind of specialist analysis we can only get from HUMINT.

The kind of intelligence analyst needed in counterinsurgency is essentially a foreign area officer, someone who speaks the language fluently, has studied the country and the region in depth, and understands the societal context of official and unofficial networks. In fighting insurgents, a competent specialist intelligence officer is far more useful than a B–2 bomber. The good news is that a human intelligence specialist is a lot cheaper than a B–2 bomber. The bad news is that it takes about as long to develop a competent country and regional expert as it does the B–2 bomber.

One of the primary problems that our forces in Iraq and Afghanistan face is the lack of fully qualified HUMINT specialists. Unlike



Iraqis protest coalition presence, Baghdad

1st Marine Division Combat Camera (Jennifer A. Krusen)

logistics, which requires general management skills that are widely available, military intelligence agencies cannot easily contract out for foreign area specialists whenever needed. If we are going to have adequate HUMINT support in a conflict, we need to build up our human intelligence capabilities long in advance. Unfortunately, at the end of the Cold War, the United States went too far in cutting human intelligence capability, and we are paying a steep price today.

The Media and Airpower

One of the most common critiques made by officers involved in counterinsurgency operations around the world is that counterinsurgent forces are doing poorly in employing the media to get the government message out, while insurgent, terrorist, and radical groups are using the media quite effectively. For one thing, insurgents, radical groups, and the states that support them are not hindered by any requirement to stick to the truth. Disinformation campaigns and deliberate falsifications are

civilian homes. Indeed, insurgents and nonstate groups get so much propaganda value from civilian casualties that they readily use the civilian population as human shields. The tactic of placing heavy weapons in highly populated areas in the hope that air forces will attack them and inflict collateral damage has become a common insurgent strategy.

During Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) placed artillery pieces and anti-aircraft guns in civilian neighborhoods, on the roofs of apartment houses, and even on hospital grounds.⁴ They hoped to provoke the Israelis to attack targets with the assurance of heavy civilian casualties. If the Israelis refrained from attacking, the PLO preserved its forces and equipment. If Israel attacked, the resulting dead civilians could be displayed to the world as victims of Israeli aggression. For the PLO, it was a win/win situation. What the PLO did in 1982, and similar actions by Hizballah in the 2006 conflict with Israel, are clearly war crimes under the Geneva Conventions. Although using civilians

short, there is a heavy political price to pay when airpower in the form of airstrikes is used.

We in the United States and in Western nations must do much better in presenting our side of the conflict to the world media. We have to be ready to counter a large-scale disinformation campaign mounted by insurgent and radical groups against our military operations. One step would be to aggressively prosecute leaders of radical and insurgent groups as war criminals for their practice of using civilians as human shields. The precedent of the Nuremberg Trials is clear: leaders can be held responsible for the systematic policy of war crimes committed by their subordinates.

Doctrinal Gaps

Currently, there are two large gaps in our strategy for employing airpower in counterinsurgency: training allied air forces facing insurgencies and ensuring that they are provided with adequate equipment. As a first principle of counterinsurgency, we must remember that we cannot win another nation's internal war for them. We can provide aid, equipment, training, and advice. We can buy them time to build up their own forces and infrastructure. But in the end, to defeat insurgents, the threatened nation has to field its own forces, develop its own strategy, and find its own political solution.

Therefore, standing up capable indigenous forces ought to be the central focus of any American counterinsurgency effort. Yet the cultural preference of the U.S. military is to view its own operations as the main effort and the training and equipping of foreign forces as a secondary mission. In Iraq, the U.S. Army and Marines did not make building the Iraqi army a priority until 2005. Little was done to build an Iraqi air force until 2006. The U.S. military mentality has put us years behind. The issue of time is especially important for air forces because it takes much longer to build an air force than it does an army due to the requirement for many highly trained specialists.

Training foreign air forces is a skill that the U.S. military has largely forgotten. But in the past, we had a strong record of building allied air forces. In the 1940s, the United States and Great Britain stood up a Greek air force that helped defeat the insurgency in that country. In the 1950s, Washington built a Philippine air force that helped defeat the Huk insurgency. In the 1960s, a small group of American advisors trained and equipped the Laotian air force, which by 1966–1967 was more successful than the U.S. Air Force

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standard methods of attacking the legitimacy of counterinsurgency operations and in whipping up local and world opinion against the United States and coalition allies.

Insurgents and nonstate forces confronting regular military forces, especially of Western states, will commonly focus their efforts against the technological advantage of the counterinsurgent forces. U.S. and Western nations are portrayed as using their asymmetric technological advantage to bully and repress the civilian population. In China during the 1920s, the gunboat was the symbol of Western technology and oppression. Today, airpower is singled out as that symbol. It is easy to make fantastic charges against air forces and to accuse them of deliberately bombing civilians, because the insurgent still controls the ground at the end of the day. This means the insurgent also controls the story—and accusations of brutality through airpower make sensational news. Insurgents and nonstate forces are also assisted by the news media, often the Western media, because they will print the insurgent and radical casualty claims without disclaimer or comment, often repeating ludicrously high figures of civilian casualties and damage to

as human shields is a gross violation of international law, many in elite circles in the West are willing to give warring nonstate groups a pass on following the basic rules of warfare.

The case of Israel is not unique. Insurgents have also used this win/win media strategy in Iraq. In Fallujah in 2004, insurgents placed munitions and weapons in 20 mosques and also used mosques as fighting positions. Of course, targeting a mosque used as a military installation is a perfectly acceptable act under the laws of war. Still, this common practice works well for the insurgents. Although the United States employs precision weapons and tries to keep damage to mosques to a minimum, there was just enough damage to ensure that insurgents could portray the conflict as Americans attacking Islam—a theme that resonates throughout the Arab nations and further radicalizes Islamic opinion.

Because aerial attack is often viewed in the Third World as cruel and heavy-handed, it creates a paradox for policymakers. While airpower is usually the most effective means to strike at insurgents and terrorists, its use will provoke outcry in many quarters of Western society and throughout the Third World. In

at destroying North Vietnamese vehicles and installations on the Ho Chi Minh trail.⁵

Moreover, we tend to forget that the U.S. program to train and advise the South Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) was one of the success stories of the Vietnam War.⁶ Flying older U.S. aircraft, VNAF units provided effective air support for the U.S. Army in the Mekong Delta in the 1960s.⁷ The VNAF's combat performance was good throughout the war, and as the United States turned control over to the South Vietnamese, the VNAF took up the burden. In the spring of 1972, it flew thousands of sorties in the successful air effort to defeat the grand North Vietnamese offensive. However, the initiative to build that force also highlights some of the complexities in supporting an allied air force. The VNAF's biggest problems were shortages of trained personnel, mechanics, and parts. While the air force had plenty of aircraft, operational rates were low due to a weak infrastructure.⁸

Coming out of Vietnam, the United States carried out a successful effort to build an effective air force in El Salvador during that nation's insurgency from 1981 to 1992. The Salvadoran air force was primarily a helicopter force, and its growth through U.S. aid and advisors gave the Salvadoran army the ability to respond quickly to rebel attacks. The provision of medevac helicopters raised the morale and fighting effectiveness of the army, and air force gunships provided helpful close air support to ground troops.⁹ The El Salvador experience is a model of doing it right.

Despite this experience, the U.S. Air Force's new counterinsurgency doctrine, Air Force Doctrine Document 2-3, *Irregular Warfare* (August 2007), uses 94 pages to highlight how the Service can fight insurgents but hardly mentions the vital mission of training the host nation air forces. When the mission is mentioned on a few pages, it is in the most general terms. In contrast, Army and Marine Corps counterinsurgency doctrine has a more detailed discussion concerning the requirements for building indigenous air forces. Although all the counterinsurgency theories emphasize building the host nation capabilities as a key to success, our own strategy tends to ignore this. Currently, the Air Force has fewer than 300 personnel to cover the worldwide mission to train allied nation air forces. We need to revamp all our Service doctrine—and our strategy—to put considerably more effort into the training and advisory mission. Few U.S. efforts have paid off

more handsomely, at relatively little expense in manpower and equipment.

Appropriate Equipment for Allies

Another area in which the Army/Marine counterinsurgency doctrine is far superior to the new Air Force doctrine is in its discussion of equipping host nation air forces. FM 3-4 recommends the use of inexpensive and relatively simple aircraft and technology for Third World allies facing insurgency.¹⁰ In the Air Force counterinsurgency doctrine, the issue of providing appropriate equipment to Third World allies is not even addressed. Simply put, the Army/Marine doctrine recognizes that effective counterinsurgency is not only about using U.S. forces, but also about helping allied nations win their own wars. Allied nations threatened with insurgency need their own air forces, but U.S. aircraft and systems are too expensive and sophisticated for Third World nations to operate and maintain.

What kind of aircraft and systems do small allied nations need? Ideally, they should be easy to maintain, survivable, able to operate from rough airfields, and capable of assuming strike or surveillance roles. In the years after World War II and Vietnam, the United States had plenty of surplus aircraft that fit the bill, but they are no longer in the inventory. One solution is to design a new counterinsurgency aircraft suitable for small allied nations.

Luckily, American initiative is not dead. In late 2003, for instance, a group of designers and manufacturers formed the U.S. Aircraft Corporation and began to build a simple and inexpensive counterinsurgency aircraft. The result is the A-67 Dragon, a light two-seater turboprop specifically designed for survivability (armored cockpit), light strike, and long endurance. Its simplicity ensures that a Third World air force can operate and maintain it. The low cost will make it possible for the United States to provide it in adequate numbers to allied nations. The A-67 has incorporated several features that are essential for counterinsurgency. It has an exceptionally long endurance, over 10 hours, which means it can keep a large area under surveillance for a long time. Use of aircraft in the surveillance role has historically been one of the most effective means of observing insurgent activity and inhibiting insurgent movement. The trained observer in the back seat with high-power lenses is still a quite dependable way to monitor ground activity. It might not be as good as some of our high-tech systems,

but it is something a Third World nation can easily do. Because gunships have also been a successful means for small air forces to provide close air support in counterinsurgency, the U.S. Aircraft Corporation is experimenting with modifying the CASA 212 twin-engine transport as a gunship.

It is remarkable that the initiative to field simple, effective aircraft for counterinsurgency did not come from the U.S. Air Force but rather from the civilian sector. It also illustrates how far we have gone in making the high-tech war part of our military culture and doctrine. However, one sign of progress is that the U.S. Air Force Special Operations Command now has great interest in these initiatives. As FM 3-24 noted, while there is an important role for high-tech airpower, there is also a vital role for low-tech means in conducting counterinsurgency. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Field Manual 3-24/Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3-33.5, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army/Headquarters, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, December 2006).

² *Ibid.*, paragraph 6-98.

³ James S. Corum and Wray Johnson, *Airpower in Small Wars* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003).

⁴ Chair Seán MacBride, *Israel in Lebanon: Report of the International Commissions to Enquire into Reported Violations of International Law by Israel during Its Invasion of Lebanon* (London: The International Commission, 1983), 147.

⁵ On the campaign of the Royal Laotian Air Force against the Ho Chi Minh trail, see Jacob van Staaveren, *Interdiction in Southern Laos* (Washington, DC: Center for Air Force History, 1993), 209, 214.

⁶ A good overview of the early years of the U.S. advisory mission to the VNAF is Robert Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: The Advisory Years to 1965* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1981).

⁷ The author's brother, 1LT Michael Corum, served in Vietnam in the Delta region from 1967 to 1968. He called for close air support several times and received support from VNAF units flying A-1 Skyraiders.

⁸ James Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004).

⁹ For an overview of this campaign and the role of airpower, see James S. Corum, "The Air War in El Salvador," *Airpower Journal* (Summer 1998).

¹⁰ FM 3-24, annex E, paragraphs E17-E18, E-31.