

# Constructing the Legacy of Field Manual 3-24

By JOHN A. NAGL

In late 2005, then-Lieutenant General David Petraeus was appointed to lead the Army's Combined Arms Command at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. After two high-profile tours in Iraq, the posting to Fort Leavenworth was no one's idea of a promotion; the dominant local industry is prisons. But to his credit, General Petraeus recognized that this supposedly backwater assignment presented an opportunity to help revamp the Army's vision of and approach to the wars that it was struggling with in Iraq and Afghanistan. He called on his old West Point classmate, Dr. Conrad Crane, to take charge of a writing team that within just over a year produced Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, in conjunction with a U.S. Marine Corps team under the direction of Lieutenant General James Mattis.

The doctrinal manual was built around two big ideas: first, that protecting the population was the key to success in any counterinsurgency campaign, and second, that to succeed in counterinsurgency, an army has to be able to learn and adapt more rapidly than its enemies. Neither of these ideas was especially new, but both were fundamental changes for an American Army that had traditionally relied on firepower to win its wars. The writing team drew upon the lessons of previous successful and unsuccessful counterinsurgency campaigns, confident that, just as there are principles of conventional war that have endured for hundreds of years, there are lasting principles of "small wars" and insurgencies that are also relevant to the wars of today.<sup>1</sup> It vetted those concepts at a major conference in February 2006 that included experts ranging from veterans of Vietnam and El Salvador to human rights advocates, who deconstructed the draft chapters and made the final product stronger.

The conference kick-started a thorough review process that engaged a broad audience of stakeholders and constituencies. FM 3-24 was extensively reviewed inside the Army and Marine Corps, but its authors also wanted to circulate the doctrine among Servicemembers who were not in the chain of command. They

published a précis of the intellectual core of the doctrine, "Principles, Imperatives, and Paradoxes of Counterinsurgency," in the March-April 2006 *Military Review*; this article was posted on the influential military blog Small Wars Journal at the time of publication to encourage additional comments from the field.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to this unusually open internal process, FM 3-24 was extensively analyzed by interested parties outside the Armed Forces, including not only the 80 or so participants who attended the Leavenworth review conference but also a much larger audience that commented on a draft version that was leaked online that summer. The writing team carefully reviewed each of the hundreds of comments it received and ultimately published

the first two decades of the Cold War. On the face of it, this frame of reference is markedly different from today, where many of the insurgent movements the United States and its allies must contend with are linked in some way to violent Islamist extremism and the "global insurgency" of the al Qaeda network. The increased role of religiously derived ideologies, combined with the ubiquity of instant global media and communications technology, allows insurgencies to influence, recruit, and fight worldwide. These features, some argue, have already rendered parts of the field manual's "classical" prescriptions insufficient, if not obsolete.<sup>3</sup> Others, including this author, contend that the differences between previous and current insurgencies are overstated

---

*no previous doctrinal manual had undergone such a public review process before publication or provided so many opportunities for comment both inside and outside the Army/Marine Corps tent*

---

a manual that was much better for the input of so many. No previous doctrinal manual had undergone such a public review process before publication or provided so many opportunities for comment to both those inside and outside the Army/Marine Corps tent.

This review process raised the stakes for a manual that would ordinarily have attracted no attention outside the Army and little inside it. Rightly or wrongly, FM 3-24 became more than a routine doctrinal publication; it became a symbol of something more expansive. To some, it pointed to a better way to confront the security challenges of the future, and to others, it was a misguided application of old concepts to fundamentally new problems.

Detractors argue that FM 3-24 takes a somewhat anachronistic approach to the problem of insurgency. It is true that the manual draws heavily from the "classical" counterinsurgency theorists such as David Galula and Sir Robert Thompson and their experiences combating the Maoist insurgencies and anticolonial conflicts that marked

and that it was necessary for a military that had largely deemphasized its understanding of counterinsurgency over the preceding 30 years to regain a grasp of insurgency's fundamental dynamics and challenges.<sup>4</sup>

FM 3-24 has also been criticized for being overly intellectual.<sup>5</sup> However, there is little doubt that the manual accomplished its main objective of setting a baseline understanding of counterinsurgency for the Army and Marine Corps. Commanders on the ground could adapt its principles and translate them into clear operational and tactical guidance as needed, as General Petraeus did in Iraq and General Stanley McChrystal has done in Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup> The field manual does not explain all the nuances of operations and tactics commanders will need in Iraq,

---

**Dr. John A. Nagl is President of the Center for a New American Security. A retired Army officer, he served in both wars in Iraq and as a member of the writing team that produced Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*.**

Afghanistan, and future battlefields; nor does it prescribe U.S. grand strategy, America's role in the world, or the future of warfare. That was never intended.

FM 3-24 is far from the Army's only doctrinal manual, or the only one that shows the influence of a new pattern of thinking about the nature of the wars we are fighting today and are likely to fight in years to come. In fact, the publication of FM 3-0, *Operations*, in February 2008 was arguably more important than the publication of FM 3-24; *Operations* is the Army's fundamental operational doctrine, the baseline that describes how the Army sees itself and its role on the battlefields of the future. It is not shy in describing itself as a significant break from the past:

*This edition of FM 3-0, the first update since September 11, 2001, is a revolutionary departure from past doctrine. It describes an operational concept where commanders employ offensive, defensive, and stability or civil support operations simultaneously as part of an interdependent joint force to seize, retain, and exploit the initiative, accepting prudent risk to create opportunities to achieve decisive results. Just as the 1976 edition of FM 100-5 began to take the Army from the rice paddies of Vietnam to the battlefield of Western Europe,*

---

*a completely different writing team produced a document that underlined the applicability of the two big ideas of Field Manual 3-24*

---

*this edition will take us into the 21<sup>st</sup> century urban battlefields among the people without losing our capabilities to dominate the higher conventional end of the spectrum of conflict.<sup>7</sup>*

As the Army's capstone doctrinal manual, FM 3-0 went through an even more rigorous internal review than did FM 3-24. It is thus significant that, with the benefit of analysis of a year's experience in applying the principles of FM 3-24 in the field, a completely different writing team produced a document that underlined the applicability of the two big ideas of FM 3-24, particularly its focus on protecting the population in order to win their support. As General William Wallace wrote in his foreword to the manual:

*The operational environment in which this persistent conflict will be waged will be complex, multidimensional, and increasingly fought "among the people." Previously, we sought to separate people from the battlefield so that we could engage and destroy enemies and seize terrain. While we recognize our enduring requirement to fight and win, we also recognize that people are frequently part of the terrain and their support is a principal determinant of success in future conflicts.<sup>8</sup>*

Field Manual 3-07, *Stability Operations*, was published in October 2008; produced by yet another writing team, having undergone another review process, its prescriptions were also in keeping with FM 3-0 and FM 3-24.

Joint Publication 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, was published in October 2009, again with similar prescriptions. And most recently, the Army Capstone Concept, entitled *Operational Adaptability*, was published December 21, 2009. Written under the direction of Brigadier General H.R. McMaster and extensively reviewed inside the Army and by panels of outside experts, the Capstone Concept was also intentionally posted in draft form on the Small Wars Journal Web site 3 months before final publication to request additional comment from the field.<sup>9</sup> As the Capstone Concept example shows, it is distinctly possible that FM 3-24's role in inspiring a more open doctrinal development process will be as important as its operational prescriptions. As



John A. Nagl



**NEW**  
from **NDU Press**

for the  
**Institute for National Strategic Studies**



### Strategic Forum 252

#### *Avoiding a Crisis of Confidence in the U.S. Nuclear Deterrent*

John P. Caves, Jr., argues that the United States needs to modernize and ensure the long-term reliability and responsiveness of its aging nuclear deterrent force and infrastructure. He opens with a hypothetical scenario that brings home the profound implications that a future crisis of confidence in its nuclear deterrent would have for U.S. security. Without a reliable nuclear deterrent, the United States cannot otherwise safely reduce its nuclear weapons, responsibly ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, deter and contain challenges from resurgent nuclear near-peers, and effectively dissuade allies and partners from acquiring their own nuclear weapons.

### Strategic Forum 251

#### *U.S.-Cambodia Defense Relations: Defining New Possibilities*

Lewis M. Stern reviews the recent history of U.S.-Cambodia defense relations, showing how Cambodia's lax border controls, widespread corruption, and active arms trade have made that country a staging ground for numerous activities that challenge the safety and well-being of the region. He argues that U.S. interests would be well served by a stepped-up program of cooperation with Cambodia in areas such as counterterrorism, peacekeeping, counternarcotics, disaster response, and stability operations. U.S. early investment in Cambodia's future—beginning with support for the regional peace process—would provide a useful foundation for cooperation and have a beneficial impact on Southeast Asia as a whole.

General William Caldwell remarked about the writing process of the *Army Stability Operations* doctrine in 2009:

*Traditionally, when we write Army doctrine, it's done in-house. The Army has a very deliberate set procedure, as many of you might imagine, as we can only do in the United States military, but we really broke the mold in doing this one. If you look back and you look at how we wrote the counterinsurgency manual, it really was the first deviation from the way army manuals are written, done in 2006 in a much more open and collaborative manner, many [in] academia and others being brought into the process. We took the lessons learned from that, applied them to this, and expanded even further going into the international community, reaching out across many, many different nations in addition to all the normal folks we talked about at the very beginning.<sup>10</sup>*

Future military doctrine should benefit from FM 3-24's example of requesting input from the field and from outsiders, making the preparation of doctrine less about traditional practice handed down from past generations and more about constant learning and adaptation based on current experience and collaboration with a broad group of concerned partners. This legacy may be as important for the future of the U.S. military as the manual's twin pillars of protecting the population and constantly learning so we can adapt to the demands of the wars we are fighting, rather than the wars we would prefer to fight. **JFQ**

<sup>4</sup> See John A. Nagl and Brian M. Burton, "Thinking Globally and Acting Locally: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Modern Wars—A Reply to Jones and Smith," *Journal of Strategic Studies* (February 2010), 123–138.

<sup>5</sup> See Bing West, *The Strongest Tribe* (New York: Random House, 2008), 120–123.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, David Petraeus, "Multi-national Force—Iraq Commander's Counterinsurgency Guidance," *Military Review* (September–October 2008), 2–4; International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), "ISAF Commander's Counterinsurgency Guidance," August 25, 2009, available at <<http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2009/08/isaf-counterinsurgency-guidanc/>>.

<sup>7</sup> William S. Wallace, "Foreword," Department of the Army, Field Manual 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, February 2008). Emphasis in original.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Robert Haddick, "The Army Wants Your Comments on Its New Capstone Concept," September 22, 2009, available at <<http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2009/09/the-army-wants-your-comments-o/>>.

<sup>10</sup> General William B. Caldwell IV, "FM 3-07 Stability Operations: A Comprehensive Approach to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," remarks at the Brookings Institution, March 27, 2009, 7–8, available at <[www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/events/2009/0327\\_stability/20090327\\_stability.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/events/2009/0327_stability/20090327_stability.pdf)>.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Kalev I. Sepp, "Best Practices in Counterinsurgency," *Military Review* (May–June 2005), 8–12; Robert M. Cassidy, "Back to the Street without Joy: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Vietnam and Other Small Wars," *Parameters* (Summer 2004), 73–83.

<sup>2</sup> Eliot A. Cohen et al., "Principles, Imperatives, and Paradoxes of Counterinsurgency," *Military Review* (March–April 2006), 49–53. As of February 2010, it had attracted no comments; see <<http://council.smallwarsjournal.com/showthread.php?p=2149>>.

<sup>3</sup> See, most notably, Frank G. Hoffman, "Neo-Classical Counterinsurgency?" *Parameters* (Summer 2007), 71–87; David Kilcullen, "Counterinsurgency Redux," *Survival* (Winter 2006/2007), 111–130; and Steven Metz, *Rethinking Insurgency* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, June 2007).

Visit the NDU Press Web site  
for more information on publications  
at [ndupress.ndu.edu](http://ndupress.ndu.edu)