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WORKING PAPER

Inside the Surge: *One Commander's Lessons in Counterinsurgency*

By LTC Jim Crider, USA
Foreword by Thomas E. Ricks



**Center for a
New American
Security**



Acknowledgements

When I returned from Iraq in April of 2008, I shared some lessons learned I had written down with my Fort Riley neighbor at the time, Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl. "This is David Galula!" he exclaimed the next day after reading it. "Who?" I responded. "Are you telling me that you don't know who David Galula is?" John asked incredulously. "Don't talk to me again until you have read his book!" Hence began my journey to put my experiences as the commander of 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry in Baghdad during the surge into some context. In addition to John's initial and ongoing inspiration, several people at the Center for a New American Security have helped me along the way with this project. Brian Burton, Seth Rosen, and Kristin Lord helped me edit and arrange my words into a more readable and understandable piece of work with precise and timely recommendations. Also, Tom Ricks greatly helped me with content by suggesting that I think about what I did not know at the beginning of my tour and how I might prepare differently if I had to return under the same circumstances. Most importantly, I want to thank the soldiers of 1-4 Cavalry who patrolled nonstop for over a year, built an unbreakable alliance with the citizens of a violent Baghdad neighborhood, and shed their blood for a cause larger than themselves.

COVER IMAGE:

U.S. Army Lt. Telleson, right, and an interpreter, both attached to 2nd Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, speak with an Iraqi soldier during his security watch at the entrance of a school in the Doura district of Southern Baghdad, Iraq, Oct. 29, 2008.

(DoD photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Todd Frantom, U.S. Navy/Released)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword	5
Introduction	7
Security	11
Economic Opportunity	15
Governance	17
Conclusion	19

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FOREWORD



Lieutenant Colonel Jim Crider's essay is, to my knowledge, the first in-depth review offered by an American battalion commander about post-invasion operations in Iraq. This is significant because in the Iraq war, that echelon generally has been the "level of action" – that is, the point in the U.S. military hierarchy where theory meets practice, and where commanders apply doctrine to the reality of the streets. Below this level, all too often, events seem unconnected, without pattern or meaning; above it, action tends to be reduced to charts in PowerPoint briefings that may or may not reflect what is actually happening on the ground.

Crider's essay is not only about this crucial level of action, it is about a critical time – the "surge" phase of the Iraq war in 2007-2008. Whether or not one believes that the surge ultimately achieved its strategic goal of a political breakthrough (I do not), there is no question that it succeeded at the tactical level. In this work, Crider shows how that happened. He begins by detailing how difficult the winter and spring of 2007 were, with some of the highest levels of violence seen against American troops in the war, at least so far. For many months, his troops, like others in Baghdad, were bombed and shot, with little or no sign of any improvement of security in the city. Some 70 Americans were killed in February, 71 in March, 96 in April, and 120 in May. General David Petraeus later told me that he looks back upon that spring as a "horrific nightmare." Then, to the surprise of many, in the summer of 2007, the level of violence began to drop precipitously.

Crider's soldiers were in the middle of this turnaround. During most of 2007 and in early 2008, his 1st Squadron of the 4th Cavalry Regiment fought in two of Baghdad's hardest-hit areas. Most of its time was spent in the southern Baghdad neighborhood of Doura, a front-line area in the war.

This is not an account of military faddism. Counterinsurgency critics such as Colonel Gian Gentile of West Point have contended that a false picture has been painted of what happened in Iraq during the surge era. He and others have maintained that putting American soldiers into the streets as a persistent, sustained presence had little to do with the concomitant improvement in security. They point to other factors, most notably deals that paid Sunni insurgents to stop fighting and the fact that by the time the surge began, the ethnic cleansing of Baghdad was largely complete. There is no question that these factors played a role. But Crider's account provides evidence of how the new American approach to the war also had a significant effect.

Crider was, like most of the U.S. Army, a reluctant counterinsurgent. He was not a Fort Leavenworth intellectual eager to try out his academic theories. Rather, he portrays himself as a fairly conventional commander seeking, as he puts it, to carry out the traditional Army mission of "destroying the enemy on the battlefield."

He analyzes with admirable candor his early errors in executing that mission. Greeted by the population with what he recalls as a "deafening silence," he reacted with fruitless and counterproductive tactics, such as cordon-and-sweep operations that only alienated the locals and underscored the fact that the Americans didn't know who or where their enemies were. To a surprising extent, he replicated in his first weeks on the ground in Iraq in 2007 many of the errors committed by American commanders in the first five years of the war. He learned, as some of them eventually did, that, "Aggressive, reactionary questioning after an attack and broad clearing operations provided little actionable intelligence – only frustration."

The Army's counterinsurgency manual, the development of which was overseen by Petraeus, was published just two months before Crider's squadron arrived in Iraq. Crider implemented this new doctrine not out of any great desire to make Iraqi friends or win their hearts and minds, but because he became persuaded that the only way to carry out his mission was to gain intelligence, and that the only way to do that was to put his soldiers on Iraqi streets and into Iraqi living rooms. If Crider drank tea with a taxi driver or paved a median strip, he did so because he came to believe that was a militarily effective step to take.

Seeing the doctrine work, Crider became a wholly committed counterinsurgent. Not only did he move his troops into neighborhood outposts, where they could react quickly and become familiar with people and patterns, he also established a round-the-clock presence in the streets. Employing a classic technique of counterinsurgency theory that generally has been neglected by the U.S. military in Iraq, he conducted a local census. By doing so, he was able to provide his troops with a "map" of the population, enabling them to ask who was a long-time resident and who might have just come from Fallujah or Sadr City to occupy a vacant house. The census process also proved to be a safe and effective way to find and develop informers without exposing them. After all, the Americans were talking to everybody, so the foe had no easy way of identifying "who talked." "In only six weeks," Crider relates, "we went from zero sources to 36."

By the halfway point in their tour, Crider and his soldiers were seasoned counterinsurgents, disaggregating the enemy, neutralizing parts of it, and acting with precision and speed against those who couldn't be persuaded to cease fighting. One measure of the growing sophistication of their approach was the ability they showed to take counterintuitive steps, such as a decision *not* to print and distribute "wanted" posters, "for fear of scaring off those we were looking for." Another measure was their sense, ineffable but essential, of having regained the initiative in the war. "In a matter of months, the tables had turned," Crider recalls. "Before, we had no idea of who was watching us or plotting attacks; now insurgents had no idea of who was giving them up."

He also arrived at some surprising conclusions. He sounds almost softhearted when he advises that, "The counterinsurgent should not attempt to hold money, services or security as a bargaining chip for information. Citizens should have these things regardless." But far from being sentimental, he actually was calculating that such withholding of aid is counterproductive. "Denying them will only cause resentment." He is, as he says, being pragmatic: *Listen to me, this is what I saw work.*

I wish I could ensure that this hard-won knowledge – earned through the blood, sweat, and tears of Americans and Iraqis alike – is not forgotten as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continue, perhaps for many more years. There is a message of hope in this essay, but also a warning: To honor the dead, we should remember not only their great sacrifices, but also their hard-earned lessons.

Thomas E. Ricks
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I served as the commander of 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment in the Doura neighborhood of Baghdad's Rashid District from February 2007 through March 2008. This neighborhood was almost exclusively Sunni, violent, and very much under the control of the insurgency. My unit confronted over 50 enemy initiated events within the first 30 days in Doura.

INTRODUCTION

As a squadron commander during the “surge” in Iraq, I learned counterinsurgency firsthand. Many of these lessons were paid for in blood and endless frustration. However, through a deliberate plan to build an alliance with the people, develop local economic opportunities to provide alternatives to the insurgency, and build a bridge between citizens and the Iraqi government, we ultimately restored stability to one extremely violent area of Baghdad. As the United States prepares to face insurgency in the future, these lessons are worth remembering.¹

Many lessons in counterinsurgency warfare transcend time, culture, and geography. The local population is involved in the insurgency/counterinsurgency battle whether they want to be or not. Therefore the counterinsurgent will not get to the insurgent if he does not go through the population first. Simultaneous steps to secure the people and separate the insurgent from their midst is imperative. Starting with a 24/7 presence designed to protect the population and the conduct of a thorough census to determine who is around you allows the counterinsurgent to build relationships with the people he is in daily contact with and eventually form an alliance. This results in better intelligence and hence, targeted detentions. In addition, disenfranchised people must be offered an alternative to the insurgency and given a personal stake in their future. Direct investment in the local economy and the integration of local men into the security forces frequently make a significant contribution toward this goal. I learned all of these broad lessons and many other detailed lessons as well. Perhaps my biggest lesson is that none of the things I learned were new.

I made several mistakes during our first 8-10 weeks on the ground in Baghdad. First, I did not truly understand the insurgency in Doura. We had little understanding of why we were being attacked despite trying to help the people of Doura.

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The chasm between our Sunni citizens and the Shiite-led Iraqi government was wide and deep. In personal conversations with neighborhood citizens, I initially exhorted them to support the newly elected Iraqi government. But the Sunnis viewed the Iraqi government as a powerful sectarian organization run by Persians bent on destroying them. Thus, with each exhortation, my credibility decreased. In addition, our partnership with the National Police battalion, a dominantly Shia organization, was an accelerant to an already volatile situation. As the only visible representation of the Iraqi government (government officials remained huddled in the Green Zone), Sunnis viewed the National Police as a Shiite militia in uniform. When we patrolled with them, resentment grew toward our soldiers, causing our efforts to be met with more resistance.

Another major problem was our inability to identify and locate active insurgents. I did not understand how to effectively build a wide-ranging intelligence network that would allow us to get

to the insurgents hiding amongst the population. Without a coherent strategy to develop such a network, we relied on a handful of informants and anonymous calls to our tip line. Aggressive, reactionary questioning after an attack and broad clearing operations provided little actionable intelligence – only frustration. We developed sources through chance meetings with concerned citizens, but this technique relied far too much on luck. I also found myself developing an over-reliance on local neighborhood government leaders who were adept at complaining and trying to secure contracts, but refused (or were unable) to provide useful intelligence. The intelligence we needed lay inside the courtyards and living rooms of the citizens barricaded in our neighborhood. But it took many weeks before we developed a plan to target these potential sources.

Without well established intelligence networks, our efforts to find insurgents were mostly in vain and lacked the critical element of surprise. In a futile attempt to surprise, we routinely executed large cordon-and-search missions that blocked the exits to a particular area. We also methodically searched through every home hoping to find some evidence connecting the resident to the insurgency. On a rare occasion, we located a cache of weapons or someone we suspected might be involved in the insurgency. Yet it was almost impossible to know for sure, due to the deafening silence of the population. Top insurgents fled from the targeted neighborhoods to safer areas, where they would wait until U.S. forces left.

Finally, I knew that our mission would be focused more on protecting the population than on transitioning responsibility to Iraqi Security Forces, but I had little conception of how to protect the population. Without an effective intelligence network in place, we spent a great deal of our time fruitlessly reacting. Our first soldier was killed during a firefight right in the heart of an urban area. Despite repeated questioning and detailed searches, not a

single person claimed to have any idea who was responsible. During these early weeks of our tour, locals complained that we were too slow to react to the tips that were called in. The frustrating truth is that they were right. We patrolled frequently, but not 24 hours a day. It takes time to prepare a patrol and maneuver it to the right area, even if it comes from a nearby outpost. Slow reactions to calls for help damaged our credibility and made it very difficult for the population to believe that we would be there to protect them if they offered to ally with us.

An issue out of our control during these first many weeks was that we simply had too large an area to cover. It would be June before the final “surge” brigade was in position. While the strategy of establishing combat outposts was certainly an effective one, it placed an additional burden on already taxed units. For example, in a company-sized outpost, one platoon secured the outpost while a second either just came off of duty or was about to assume those responsibilities. The third platoon was available to patrol for a few hours before it too had to participate in the security of the outpost. Leaders at all levels must calculate this manpower cost when determining the number of outposts to establish.

For a ground combat soldier engaged in a counterinsurgency, every decision and action is focused on finding the insurgent and removing him from the conflict. American ground forces are still in the business of destroying the enemy on the battlefield. Whether the form of warfare is conventional, counterinsurgency, or “hybrid” warfare, the mission will always center on identifying and destroying the enemy and his capability along with any other agents who stand in the way of our assigned mission.

To do this, I found it helpful to divide insurgents into two basic categories. The first is the insurgent motivated by ideology. This is the most dangerous group because no amount of goodwill or aggressive

action will cause him to alter his way of thinking or behavior. We found this group to be rather small in our area of operations. The second category of insurgent is made up of those who found themselves caught up in the insurgency but lacked a true philosophical tie to the violent ideologues. Some were often local thugs who decided to take advantage of the chaos to seize power. Others were motivated to participate due to a lack of economic opportunity. With few available jobs, it was easy for them to accept modest amounts of money to serve as lookouts reporting on our location or to bury and detonate IEDs. Many were teenagers lacking parental supervision who were persuaded to join the insurgency in order to gain a form of respect.

Therefore, many insurgents were simply people with a legitimate grievance caught up in a chaotic situation, not hardcore members of al Qaeda. David Kilcullen, an Australian counterinsurgency expert, states that, “The local fighter is therefore an accidental guerilla – fighting us because we are in his space, not because he wishes to invade ours.” The insurgent “is engaged (from his point of view) in ‘resistance’ rather than ‘insurgency’ and fights principally to be left alone.”² Over time we learned that these “accidental guerillas” could be reconciled or would conform to societal norms if greater security was provided and more economic opportunity existed. In other words, we had to change the conditions that motivated disaffected Sunni citizens to participate in the insurgency. If we could do this, then the majority of the violence would begin to dissipate without large-scale detentions and increased resentment against us for doing so. The first category of insurgent had to be removed from society by being captured or killed. There was no other way. The second group, however, could be reconciled with or convinced to stop aiding the insurgency if the circumstances in his neighborhood drastically improved.

The insurgent's single most important advantage is his ability to hide in plain sight. This contrasts with our primary disadvantage – that our adversary knows where we are and what we are doing at all times. The insurgent freely moves about a neighborhood hidden within the population. Soldiers, meanwhile, patrol in a standard uniform and on a known platform, be it a HMMWV (Humvee), Stryker, Bradley, or tank. We could never change our uniform or hide amongst the population. That left us, as it has all counterinsurgents, one option: we had to find a pragmatic approach that would motivate the local population to tell us exactly who and where the insurgents were. If we could remove the ideological insurgents and change the conditions that attracted the insurgents of “opportunity,” then we could create the breathing space necessary for establishing security. For a soldier on the ground, this would be a major step toward victory.

Clearing neighborhoods, we would learn, is a process, not a single tactical operation. Indeed, we need not have learned this on our own. More than 45 years earlier, French counterinsurgency theorist Roger Trinquier wrote that, “Large unit sweeps, conducted with conventional resources

within a framework similar to that of conventional warfare, and invariably limited in time, temporarily disperse guerrilla bands rather than destroy them.”³ More recently, counterinsurgency expert John Nagl described this same flawed approach: “Gradually, the army learned that ‘shoulder-to-shoulder’ sweeps were not productive but actually counterproductive; instead of massing troops, the army developed small patrols that used the skills of native trackers and intelligence...to target selected terrorists with the minimum force required.”⁴

This kind of war is a battle for intelligence, and intelligence could only come from the local population. As David Galula wrote in his classic treatise on counterinsurgency warfare, “the population will not talk unless it feels safe, and it does not feel safe until the insurgent's power has been broken.”⁵ The people refused to tell us who the “ideological” insurgents were for fear of their own lives. Even more challenging, some refused to tell us who the insurgents of opportunity were because they were family members and neighbors. Besides, the insurgent efforts were focused on coalition forces, who many felt were responsible for the violence, chaos and lack of security.

Some soldiers felt that the local population owed them information and became frustrated when the only answer they received from locals after an attack was, “I don't know anything! This is all done by outsiders.” This can lead to a feeling of animosity towards the people, which can greatly hamper one's ability to gather intelligence on the insurgent. The fact is the people of Baghdad did not owe us anything. We owed them.



35th Street in Muhalla 840 of Doura in May of 2007.
 (Photo by A/1-4 Cavalry)

SECURITY

So, exactly what did we owe them? First, we needed to protect the population in order to create conditions that would provide them an opportunity to talk to us. Second, we had to earn their trust and confidence in order to motivate them to provide intelligence. Our efforts to create opportunity and then to supply motivation were all oriented toward our single goal: removing the insurgent from the neighborhood.

In an attempt to build a far-reaching, viable intelligence network, we took several steps in Doura. First, we secured the population 24 hours a day, 7 days a week with two mutually supporting platoons in our most populated neighborhoods. This persistent coverage paid immediate dividends. During the four days prior to 24/7 coverage we dealt with a total of eight improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Three of the IEDs were found prior to detonation with the remaining five exploding and wounding three of our soldiers. During the four days immediately after we implemented 24/7 coverage, we only had one IED detonate while one other was found.

Second, concrete barriers also contributed to the security of the population by forcing people and vehicles to enter and exit through controlled checkpoints that essentially acted as a filter.

Third, we conducted an ongoing census (Operation Close Encounters) that helped us begin the process of separating the insurgents from the population. We focused on developing personal relationships with people that grew over time into an alliance against the insurgency.

One of the centerpiece strategies of the surge in Iraq during 2007-2008 was to move forces off large forward operating bases and onto smaller combat outposts among the people. I found that these outposts were quite useful, but not sufficient to truly meet the intent of being among the people.

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To maintain a constant and close watch, and for our own protection, we decided to remain on the streets every hour of every day. We eventually learned that this relentless presence had a powerful psychological effect on the local population. The sight of our HMMWVs on the streets and soldiers engaging people in conversation all day and night sent a message to insurgents and average citizens alike. Unlike units of the past, who were forced to conduct a quick patrol and unable to engage the people, we literally never left. We were easily accessible and, therefore, began to receive more tips on insurgent activity.

Our constant presence allowed us to immediately act on tips and investigate suspicious activity without delay. In late August of 2007, one of our mounted patrols was hit by an IED while traveling on the Doura Highway just outside of the densest part of our assigned area and within 300 meters of our combat outpost. Hearing the blast and the reports of the attack on the radio, the security camera operator in the outpost quickly focused the camera on the neighborhood just to the west of where the blast occurred. In moments he saw two men running through the neighborhood away from the incident and was able to provide a description of them by way of their respective

shirt color; one in red and the other in green. The lieutenant in charge of the patrol passed on the description to the remainder of his platoon that was still in the neighborhood patrolling. Within minutes, an alert noncommissioned officer spotted a man in a red shirt running across the street in front of him. The soldiers detained the man and found a microcassette in his pocket that later was discovered to contain a video of the attack, complete with sound. In addition, because this platoon had developed so many relationships with people in that part of the neighborhood, they were able to quickly collect several written statements placing the man at the scene of the attack.

The density of troops available in Baghdad for the surge allowed us an opportunity that no unit had since the start of the war. As late as fall 2006, there were only two battalions operating in the Rashid District in Southwest Baghdad. By summer 2007 there were five battalions assigned there, with a peak of seven battalions when two Stryker battalions temporarily operated in the highly contested Doura neighborhood.



*SFC Devin Winnegan spends time with a neighborhood man in his home during Operation Close Encounters.
 (Photo by Chris Hondros / Getty Images)*

Our constant presence was amplified with the initiation of Operation Close Encounters, which, at its core, was a census. We collected more than just data about residents in the neighborhood. The operation increased the personal contact between our soldiers and the population, thereby increasing the number of safe opportunities for those willing to provide intelligence.

To maintain the anonymity of our informants, we visited every house on an assigned street. In the privacy of their home, and with the knowledge that we would visit every house, the population felt it had sufficient cover to talk freely. Sometimes an individual offered specific information on an insurgent in the form of a sworn statement; at other times we would get a tip that several unknown males had just moved into an empty house across the street. Regardless, we could act on this information immediately or use it to create a target folder.

During these relaxed meetings we collected basic information about people and photographed the adult males. Soon we knew where groups of families were located and we began to learn who got along and who did not. This afforded us the opportunity to engage with those vital to rebuilding civil society, including a former provincial governor, doctors, and general contractors, as well as carpenters and engineers. In only six weeks, we went from zero sources to 36; a number that would increase to well over 100 by the time we redeployed nine months later.

On occasion, we met former Army officers or others who were eager to share intelligence. A select few were even running their own sources on the insurgency. During a patrol in mid-July 2007, one of our platoon leaders met a man during Operation Close Encounters who seemed to have a great deal of information about the insurgency. He spoke about personalities that we knew were involved in the insurgency, so we arranged for the man to

meet with our tactical human intelligence team for a deeper discussion. We then discovered that this man was already running a network of 10 other individuals in Doura and areas south of Baghdad, all of who were already collecting information on the Sunni insurgency. This source provided information to us that led to 26 Draft Intelligence and Information Reports, which are the foundation of all intelligence for Coalition Forces in Iraq, and the primary evidence used to detain targets. Even better, the information that he and his sub-sources provided allowed us to detain 10 targets – including the Squadron number seven high value target, who was responsible for IED emplacements on three occasions in January 2008. He was subsequently utilized by Corps level Task Forces in an effort to target high-level al Qaeda leaders in Baghdad and the areas to its south. Before 15 July 2007, he was unknown to us and he would have likely remained so had one sharp platoon leader not engaged him in conversation in the privacy of his home. Operation Close Encounters gave this man a veil of anonymity and, thus, protected him from insurgent reprisals.

To our benefit, insurgents remained confident in their ability to hide within the population even after that ability was compromised. On one occasion, a platoon acted on a tip from an informant that a major insurgency financier named Abu Zahra was living in the neighborhood. Under the guise of Operation Close Encounters, the platoon leader and his soldiers conducted the now normal procedure of talking to families and taking pictures of the males. Through casual discussion, someone pointed out Abu Zahra's home so the platoon moved to confirm that this was the same person and determine if he was actually there. Upon knocking on the door and being invited in, there was only an adult female and several children. The platoon leader sat down and began talking to the woman about her children by asking their names, ages, etc. After one of the children

“In just a matter of months, the tables had turned. Before, we had no idea who was watching us or plotting attacks; now insurgents had no idea who was giving them up.”

announced his name was Zahra, the platoon leader knew he had found the right house. The unsuspecting wife of our financier then told the patrol that her husband would definitely be home that evening. The patrol even let the woman know they would return later to collect a photo of her husband just as we did for every other male in the neighborhood. Later that evening they detained Abu Zahra with no disruption to the remainder of the neighborhood and without endangering anyone.

We avoided the practice of posting wanted posters for fear of scaring off those we were looking for. We had amassed a large collection of pictures of people taken during Operation Close Encounters, as well as during casual engagements on the street. Sources would look at these pictures and identify both upstanding citizens and those who might be involved in the insurgency. With statements of evidence in hand and using the positive identification of a photo, we began to detain insurgents without any disruption to the rest of the neighborhood. More than once we even coaxed an insurgent to drive himself to the forward operating base with the promise of a weapons permit, whereupon we detained him.

In just a matter of months, the tables had turned. Before, we had no idea who was watching us or plotting attacks; now insurgents had no idea who

“By the waning months of 2007, violence in our Doura neighborhood had dropped to levels unimaginable the previous summer.”

was giving them up. This is how we cleared the area of the ideological insurgents and those closest to them.

In the longer term, giving the people a stake in their own security was critical to a positive solution. The establishment of the Sons of Iraq provided us an opportunity to do that while providing a paycheck to formerly unemployed military aged men. Unlike the Anbar province or the Baghdad neighborhood of Ameriyah where there was a kinetic revolt by the Sons of Iraq against al Qaeda, our Sons of Iraq organization was formed from our widespread source network. These men did not show public support for the counterinsurgency until the local insurgency was largely defeated. However, their visible presence on the streets and at key locations throughout Doura essentially insured that there would not be a return of al Qaeda or its influence to that neighborhood.

In addition to this deterrence effect, the Sons of Iraq program allowed us to provide many more men with a job. Far from bribing them to stop fighting us, we took away a reason for much of the disaffection with a regular salary. We also used a detailed screening process to look for insurgents attempting to disrupt our Sons of Iraq program. This process resulted in the detention of several applicants. One of our most important challenges with the Sons of Iraq was to integrate them with the existing National Police presence. By the

waning months of 2007, violence in our Doura neighborhood had dropped to levels unimaginable the previous summer. We found that the National Police, who we had also worked hard to build a relationship with, very much appreciated the peaceful atmosphere that had developed and were somewhat motivated to keep things that way. We integrated Sons of Iraq with each National Police checkpoint and invited Sons of Iraq leaders to our weekly security meetings with the National Police. I frequently walked with the National Police battalion commander to inspect the Sons of Iraq in an effort to build a relationship between them all and to minimize opportunities for misunderstanding.

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

The dissolute economic situation fueled resentment toward the government. A lack of economic opportunities spurred otherwise law-abiding residents to participate in the insurgency in order to provide for their families. Alissa Rubin, a reporter for the *New York Times*, spent several days with our unit in December 2007. One local man told her that, “We have a lot of unemployment, and anyone, if he doesn’t have a job, takes even a job where he does bad things to provide for his family.”⁶ It was clear that an improvement in the economic situation would reduce participation in the insurgency and lower the level of violence.

To achieve our goals, we required money. Money gave us the means and political capital to motivate otherwise wary residents to help. Authority without money would have reduced us to pleading with citizens to cooperate.

We distributed money in the form of rewards for information, micro-grants for small businesses, salaries through local contracts, and condolence



With increased security and the targeted distribution of micro grants, businesses re-opened at an alarming rate offering an alternative to the insurgency.

(Photo by Major Paul Callahan / 1-4 Cavalry)

“It is one thing to tell people you sympathize with them; it is quite another to do something about an immediate need.”

payments. Reward money did not serve as the motivator for intelligence that one might think. Troop commanders had immediate access to reward funds that were paid in amounts ranging from \$20 to \$50 for on-the-spot tips. There was also a more laborious application process for sources that provided intelligence that led to the capture of a high value individual or a large cache of insurgent material. It was not uncommon for people to refuse the smaller rewards. It was also not unusual for sources to continuously provide intelligence without getting paid. Many felt it was their duty and several told us that they received great satisfaction in seeing us capitalize on the information provided. Those registered sources that regularly sought intelligence and risked their lives needed the reward money to concentrate their efforts on intelligence gathering. Our best source often warned us that he would have to stop working for us in order to drive a taxi and make money to support his family if we could not get him something to live on.

Targeted micro-grants had an immediate and visible impact on the economy. The brigade commander could approve up to \$5,000 per micro-grant. The turnaround from application to money in hand was often less than two weeks. While some who received grants had never run a business before, it did not take much skill to open a cell phone store or sell food. Most, however, were carpenters, welders, and otherwise experienced businessmen who quickly opened small shops and

hired one or two people. Because of the dynamics of Baghdad (fear of illegal detention at a checkpoint, kidnapping, and general violence), most of the citizens were forced to shop locally, so there were plenty of customers. We started the program with a centralized application process but soon realized that platoon leaders on patrol were the most effective conduits for handing out applications to prospective businessmen. We learned over time that, like Operation Close Encounters, the psychological impact of handing out a significant grant was immeasurable. It is one thing to tell people you sympathize with them; it is quite another to do something about an immediate need.

Condolence payments were also an important effort on our part to assist innocent people who had been injured as a result of our kinetic actions. Almost without exception, the condolence payments of up to \$1,000 were made as a result of escalation of force incidents where people were injured by warning shots. These payments did not undo tragedy, but did serve as a salve to what could have been perceived as reckless behavior.



*Walls like this one helped to isolate the neighborhoods and made it much more difficult for insurgents to move freely.
 (Photo by Major Paul Callahan / 1-4 Cavalry)*

We also used money to increase the legitimacy of local authorities. The Iraqi District Advisory Council and associated neighborhood council members signed paperwork, held meetings, and showed up for every school and clinic opening. However, they had no influence or power over the citizens that they purportedly represented. This was true for one reason: they had no discretionary budget. Citizens do not respect or take an interest in political representation that cannot improve their personal plight.

When selecting a project we always involved trusted local advisors who actually resided in the community. Our most successful project was trash collection. At one point, we employed over 100 men on this contract. To us that meant 100 families now had a sustainable income. It also cleaned up the neighborhood, which was a psychological boost for the population as well as a physical improvement in the neighborhood. People told us that it meant a great deal to them when someone came by to pick up their trash because they were being served. Also, as the physical appearance of the neighborhood improved it presented an image that things were truly getting better. Our contracted trash workers also provided us with intelligence they heard while working, news of strange people moving through the area, and discovered several IEDs prior to detonation. Other projects included the installation of new curbs and sidewalks, the capping of a dirt median, and the construction of soccer fields and parks. Other projects such as micro-generation, the installation of new transformers and power lines, and efforts to repair the damaged sewage system did not employ large numbers of people but directly impacted the quality of life of local citizens.

GOVERNANCE

Disenfranchisement is the wellspring of insurgency. A given group that feels as though it has been dealt an injustice may see no legitimate way to correct it other than lashing out against its oppressor. This makes insurgencies especially reliant on changes in the political environment. The Army's own manual on counterinsurgency, published in 2006, states that, "In the long run, developing better governance will probably affect the lives of the populace more than any other COIN [counterinsurgency] activities. When well executed, these actions may eliminate the root causes of the insurgency."⁷

The political challenges were immense within our almost exclusively Sunni neighborhood. The few local politicians were invisible, lacked money, and possessed little legitimacy with their constituents. The Sunnis in Doura felt that the national government was completely biased toward Shiites and dominated by Iran. There simply was no connection between the central government and the people in our neighborhood. Most considered us their real governmental authority since we provided security, created jobs, and repaired broken infrastructure. Journalist Alissa Rubin captured this sentiment in an article involving our unit when she quoted a local resident as saying, "We ask the government for help, for electricity, for any services, but they do not even meet with us," he said. "The only government that has cleaned anything in our area is Captain Cook, he is our government."⁸ With al Qaeda in Iraq essentially defeated in Baghdad, it was clear that if the Iraqi government would just reach out to the Sunni population there would have been no reason for them to continue aiding and fueling the insurgency.

In the absence of Iraqi government involvement, we attempted to fill the void of government services. In addition to the aforementioned efforts to create jobs, we also arranged the delivery of

"There simply was no connection between the central government and the people in our neighborhood. Most considered us their real governmental authority since we provided security, created jobs, and repaired broken infrastructure."

propane and benzine to the neighborhood. Shiited insurgency groups, primarily the Jayshe Al Madi, controlled the distribution of these much needed energy sources. People needed propane for cooking. While many Shiite neighborhoods in Baghdad received regular rations of propane,



*Listening to the people and their concerns was an important part of building an alliance with them.
(Photo by Michael Yon)*

“As part of pre-deployment training, unit leaders must study the political causes behind the insurgency.”

Doura got almost nothing without our direct involvement in escorting and pushing those in authority to deliver it. Benzine, needed for cars and generators, was sold on the black market at five times the normal price. We were able to persuade the Doura oil refinery to regularly supply us with a small tanker of benzine to be sold right in the neighborhood to individuals at market cost. Finally, we were fortunate to have a beladiyah right in our area as well. A beladiyah functions as a department of public works, conducting maintenance on all city owned property. This beladiyah was dormant prior to our direct involvement. Sewage trucks and other equipment and expertise sat unused despite the great need for them. Our soldiers acted as a catalyst to utilize local resources and talent to fill the government void.

We pleaded for Iraqi government officials to visit Doura in late 2007 and early 2008. We wanted to show them that the neighborhood was no longer the insurgent haven that many locked up in the Green Zone still believed. We twice brought Iraqi journalists to film the neighborhood and interview the residents to get the truth out and catch the eye of those in government. When General Petraeus visited us in early January 2008, he brought with him Nada Ibrahim, a Sunni legislator, to see the change that had taken place.

An opportunity arose in March 2008 when the Iraqi Government announced that they wanted to form tribal support councils from the local population to serve as another voice for residents.

In many ways, it appeared to be a parallel organization to the existing District Advisory Councils – but such was politics in Iraq. We worked with our most influential leaders in the area and coached them on organizing and holding an election. These neighborhood leaders came to an agreement on which candidates they wanted to nominate, and then began organizing support for them. An influential sheik in the area hosted the election under the supervision of the National Police. After one long afternoon we had representative leadership who actually had the opportunity to interface with the central government. We were not under the illusion that political victory was at hand, but the situation was better than before the elections.

CONCLUSION

Pragmatism guides the path to victory for a counterinsurgent force. While there is no specific set of steps that will lead us to assured victory in asymmetric conflicts, counterinsurgents need local people to serve as allies in the battle against insurgents. To achieve this requires a deep understanding of the cause of the insurgency as well as the culture in which it is happening. The counterinsurgent must create opportunities and supply motivation in order to gain the allegiance of the people. This occurs in the form of personal engagement with and protection of the population. Equally important is the promise of greater economic opportunity and a political process that allows residents to address grievances peacefully.

As part of pre-deployment training, unit leaders must study the political causes behind the insurgency. A deep understanding of the culture is important but only immersion can truly provide the depth of understanding required to feel comfortable amongst a foreign people. Misusing a phrase or utilizing a culturally insensitive hand gesture may cause some awkwardness but it will not lose the war. However, a failure to understand the broad political causes and the local politics involved in the insurgency can thwart a campaign plan and every-day decisions alike. Well meaning but ill informed decisions cost time, resources, and even lives. Experienced Army foreign area officers, defense policy makers, well respected writers, and think tank representatives should be invited to speak to brigade-level leadership and higher to help them understand the politics behind the insurgency where the unit will fight.

Once deployed, the first action all battalion-level units must undertake is to conduct a thorough and ongoing census. The counterinsurgent must know who lives in his area in order to begin the process of separating the insurgent from the population. If the counterinsurgent does not understand who is

supposed to be in his area then he will never begin to understand who is not supposed to be there. In addition, building personal relationships, discovering local talent, and gaining first-hand knowledge of the issues that affect the people is critical to the intelligence gathering process and the ability to build alliances. An alliance, by definition, is a merging of interests and efforts. The cultural divide that often exists between the counterinsurgent and the local people is not important here. Justice, security, family, and the opportunity to make a comfortable living know no cultural boundaries and stand as the foundations of an alliance between the counterinsurgent and the people.

An attitude of unconditional service toward the affected population will eventually yield intelligence and cooperation. Once the people realize that the counterinsurgent is working in their best interest, then they will be more inclined to cooperate. The counterinsurgent should not attempt to hold money, services, or security as a bargaining chip for information. Denying these items will only cause resentment.

The mission of the U.S. military still revolves around imposing our will on the adversary,



*35th Street returned to life in March of 2008.
(Photo by A/1-4 Cavalry)*

whether our adversary is a standing conventional army or a group of insurgents hidden among the population. Our current and future enemies realize that they have a better chance of defeating us by engaging in an irregular war. As we work to bring the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan to a close, let us make sure that we are just as prepared to engage in counterinsurgency as we are conventional warfare. Otherwise, the cost in blood, time, and treasure will be will higher than the nation can bear.

ENDNOTES

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