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Commentary & Reply

Airpower in COIN

To the Editor:

There are only two problems with Major General Charles J. Dunlap, Jr.'s article "Making Revolutionary Change: Airpower in COIN Today" (*Parameters*, Summer 2008): (1) He does not understand counterinsurgency (COIN) and (2) He does not understand airpower.

Essentially, his assertion that airpower "became critical to COIN operations in 2007" is based on Anthony Cordesman's December 2007 report which states that airstrikes in Iraq increased nearly fivefold between 2006 and 2007. General Dunlap explains this increase as being due to airpower's "precision and persistence revolutions." Effectively, he is intimating that if only we would have dropped more bombs, we could have achieved this reduction in violence years ago.

The glaring point General Dunlap continually misses is that without ground-derived intelligence, we would have no idea whom to target. Airborne intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), while increasingly capable, is still largely unable to positively discern insurgent from civilian unless an attack on Coalition forces is in progress. Over-reliance on airborne ISR and kinetics puts the initiative into the enemy's hands. The insurgent decides when and where to reveal himself through an attack; we must wait until we "see" it to respond.

General Dunlap goes on to claim the increase in airstrikes is due to a shift in strategy, citing a 2008 Congressional Research Service report. The same report, two paragraphs later, reveals the true reason for the sharp increase:

In January 2008, Major General Edgington [Multi-National Force-Iraq Air Component Coordination Element Director] explained that close air support [CAS]—or "on-call" support—is the type of kinetic airpower that has been most in demand in Iraq. Coordinated air/ground operations during the first several months after the arrival of the full surge force produced the heaviest CAS requirements, but afterward the demand tapered off. The significantly higher demand for CAS had been less a reflection of a deliberate strategy to use more airpower, than a natural result of a significantly larger number of US troops, working significantly more closely with Iraqi counterparts and in local neighborhoods, and getting better information that made target identification much easier. As of January 2008, in a shift from mid-2007, the majority of weapons dropped were targeting deeply buried [improvised explosive devices].

To clarify: The increase in airstrikes was a byproduct of the increase in troops; fortunately, another byproduct of the increase in troops (and dispersing them) was better (targetable) information about the insurgency. It was not, as

General Dunlap suggests, a deliberate effort to increase kinetic strikes as a change to strategy.

Nor should it have been. The more important component of General David Petraeus's change in strategy has been the dispersal of American and Iraqi forces into the populace, and the establishment of persistent presence. This is the true "persistence revolution"—the effect within the minds of the Iraqi populace that is achieved by the relative increase in security throughout the day and night, not just when a patrol rolls through the neighborhood.

There is a very good reason Field Manual (FM) 3-24 identifies the local populace as the center of gravity in COIN. It is the belief that American and legitimate partner nation forces will persist and ultimately provide a more secure environment for the local populace that ultimately turns a population away from supporting an insurgency. Then, and only then, will Coalition forces begin to see increases in cooperation from the local populace in identifying and locating insurgents. Perhaps for the first time since 2003 we know on a large scale whom to surveil and target.

It is regarding this point that General Dunlap shows a fundamental lack of understanding about what is written in FM 3-24 as opposed to "the perception of the doctrine," which he describes with the phrase "winning hearts and minds." The phrase "hearts and minds" appears only one time in FM 3-24; it is specifically defined there to dispel the connotations General Dunlap attempts to place upon it. The definition is worth repeating in full:

"Hearts" means persuading people that their best interests are served by COIN success. "Minds" means convincing them that the force can protect them and that resisting it is pointless. Note that neither concerns whether people like soldiers and Marines. Calculated self-interest, not emotion, is what counts.

Furthermore, General Dunlap's assertion that the increase in troop strength to achieve FM 3-24's prescribed force ratios would alone be sufficient to "overwhelm" the insurgency—even without implementing any of the doctrine's other principles—is also erroneous. If force ratios were all that were required to defeat an insurgency, then troop levels "surging" above 500,000 in 1968 should have done the trick in South Vietnam.

General Dunlap's understanding of existing airpower capabilities is as misguided as his understanding of COIN. The "precision revolution" in weapons he mentions did indeed occur in the Middle East—but in 1991. Operation Desert Storm saw the first widescale use of precision-guided munitions, many of which possessed similar or better precision attributes than the Small Diameter Bomb (SDB). SDB is a Global Positioning System (GPS)-based system, and as such falls into the same precision-class of existing GPS/inertial navigation-guided weapons, such as the GBU-31 and -38 (more commonly known as Joint Direct Attack Munitions).

Furthermore, SDB is currently fielded on only one of the many strike aircraft providing daily close air support sorties, the F-15E. As the SDB is a

coordinate-seeking weapon, the target must remain stationary from launch to impact in order to score a hit, which is sometimes problematic during close air support. While it represents an improvement, SDB is not the panacea it is made out to be.

It is the reduced blast and fragmentation effects of the SDB that are the real improvement over existing weapons. But those effects aren't really new, either. The MQ-1 Predator has been armed with Hellfire missiles since at least the early days of Operation Enduring Freedom. At 100 pounds, the Hellfire missile weighs 60 percent less than the SDB; as a weapon designed to punch through armored vehicles using a focused "shaped charge" effect, it also possesses an extremely small lethal radius. It is no coincidence the US Army has employed the Hellfire from its rotary-winged platforms since 1985.

Perhaps the real revolution in airpower is the extensive means by which restraint is exercised in targeting. Cordesman, in a follow-on airpower report, notes:

There are no counts of the numbers of attack sorties that had to be canceled because of the risk of civilian casualties and collateral damage, and the munitions data do not show the emphasis put on limiting the size of munitions or altering the aim point to reduce civilian casualties and collateral damage when attack missions were carried out No one can visit the command facilities involved, watch ISR activity in practice, and see the way in which targets are being selected or rejected without being impressed by the fact that "precision" has been combined with "restraint."

Painstaking efforts to reduce civilian casualties and collateral damage serve to deprive the insurgency of both new supporters and propaganda opportunities. As difficult as it may be to employ, restraint is a key tenet with which to integrate airpower's kinetic effects into COIN efforts.

In his parting paragraph, General Dunlap proclaims that "the experience of 2007 clearly demonstrates that its newfound precision and persistence have revolutionized COIN warfare. US doctrine must evolve to fully capitalize airpower's newly enhanced prowess." This is patently false. What "the experience" of 2007 demonstrated—and what has to be captured within doctrine—was that understanding the true nature of the relationship between the enemy and its environment, then adjusting one's forces and strategy accordingly, is the real key.

If airpower is to be taken seriously as a "critical" part of COIN operations, then its advocates need to demonstrate a fundamental understanding of both COIN and airpower. Anything less only provides fodder to those who would keep airpower relegated to an appendix.

Major Rob Masaitis, USAF
Naval Postgraduate School

To the Editor:

Major General Charles J. Dunlap usually provides articulate and thoughtful insight. However, his recent article "Making Revolutionary Change:

Airpower in COIN Today” does not match his previous efforts. General Dunlap takes a narrow look at counterinsurgency (COIN), building an easily demolished straw man to support an airpower-centric approach to COIN. US airpower may be our best kinetic tool to offer a partner nation suffering an insurgency. It is only effective, however, in conjunction with ground forces, ideally from the host nation. There is no “airpower-centric” solution to COIN, just as there is no “military-centric” solution.

The persistence and precision of airpower provide a critical kinetic capability. However, this is only one contribution to one aspect of suppressing insurgency. Ground troops doing COIN are mired in a small-unit, small-arms contest. Insurgents limit friendly firepower by operating anonymously within “innocent” populations. Insurgents maintain the initiative by concentrating forces at times and places of their choosing, or by melting away to avoid unfavorable confrontations. Airpower creates high ground for the friendlies, giving them an ability to see, move, and shoot that can dominate insurgents stuck on the ground. Airpower is the only weapon the friendlies have to overmatch the insurgents. Killing isolated insurgents, once they are located, can be done with anything from rocks to airpower. Airpower kills insurgents stupid enough to operate in identifiable units away from “innocents.” Airpower drastically shortens friendly response times, converting any insurgent initiative into an opportunity to destroy insurgents. That said, all airpower can do is suppress insurgent activity and prevent the insurgency from escalating to open civil war.

Airpower cannot succeed without boots on the ground. COIN is all about legitimacy, and the de facto standard of legitimacy is the ability of a government to occupy, control, and service the population. You can’t do this from the air. The government must have presence, the boots of cops, social workers, bureaucrats, etc. on the ground to demonstrate control and to provide security. You have got to be there or be able to go there at will and for extended periods.

A conceptual problem occurs when assisting someone else’s COIN. US forces can provide a continuous presence among the population. This, however, generates local resistance to a perceived occupation and undermines the legitimacy of the government we are ostensibly supporting. Ultimately, COIN must be done with local forces. The force ratios required are variable; General Dunlap cites the 20 per 1,000 figure. The real force ratio required can be seen by looking at the number of police and internal security forces historically needed to keep order in the society suffering the insurgency, assuming competent forces. To assist a partner nation, US forces need to fill gaps in those local forces or replace local security forces that are absent (as in the aftermath of Operation Iraqi Freedom).

Our “perfect” solution is to assist those locals. When there are no locals we need to be prepared to step in and hold the line while developing local capability. In such an environment, US forces need only maintain the status quo against the insurgents, letting local forces achieve the wins, and the credit, as they become capable. General Dunlap’s attitude reflects the most common problem with using conventional forces to do COIN—we want to do it ourselves, quickly, and with instant progress toward victory.

Provided America is willing to work directly with host-nation forces, US airpower can provide the host nation with the high-ground advantages previously noted. Our real focus, however, needs to remain on building a host nation's airpower capability so they can fight their own battles. General Dunlap's opposition to this idea is troubling. To quote: "Most troubling, a central pillar of the doctrine is 'building partnership capacity,' or BPC. While BPC may have strategic, 'big picture' value apart from [irregular warfare], it has little practical utility in most COIN environments."

This statement indicates a complete lack of understanding of COIN (and is arguably a dangerous attitude for anyone involved in COIN). Building local capacity is the whole point of COIN. Only local forces can defeat an insurgency. A third party can suppress insurgent activity. Unless a force intends to remain forever (effectively becoming the government through conquest and colonization) one needs to develop local capability. BPC is time consuming, but it is much less expensive than deploying and maintaining US forces. The Congressional Research Service reported that the US Air Force spent at least \$18 billion in Iraq during 2007. Guess how much of that went to the 370th Group building the Iraqi Air Force? So far, we have provided some C-130s, Mi-17s, UH-1s, and Cessnas. More to the point, the Iraqis have the oil dollars to buy their own equipment. Calling BPC expensive is an error of fact.

There is also no requirement to build a "low tech" partner air force. Predators and gunships are just as "high tech" as F-16s. In fact, Predators are two decades of technology more advanced. For each application you pick the right accompanying technology—cheap and easy to maintain Cessnas with high-tech sensors and communications, cheap and sturdy Mi-17s, etc. At the same time, COIN forces should not represent the only effort in BPC. They are one aspect of a total solution to build the host nation's national security.

All that said, General Dunlap's reflection that "the notion that American COIN or nation-building efforts can best be executed by infusing the host state with large numbers of US troops is fundamentally flawed" is brilliantly correct. This statement is the heart of the inherently interagency and host nation-focused strategy required to be successful in COIN.

Maybe the problem is again words. The host nation does COIN; they are fighting insurgents. What the United States (or any outside power) does is foreign internal defense, the military piece of the big-picture internal defense and development. We should not be doing COIN, unless the insurgents are operating in Idaho.

John Jogerst
Colonel, USAF (Ret.)

The Author Replies:

I am always pleased when my writing stimulates discussion. I am also pleased when critics like Major Masaitis are reduced to ad hominem attacks, because that means my substantive points are hitting home.

My view is that analog thinking in a digital era is a mistake. For example, we should not assume that twenty-first century insurgencies mirror those of the past. Furthermore, we ought not to cling to legacy perceptions as to what technology can do today based on its limits at some earlier time. To leverage the full potential of the whole joint team, we have to innovate and adapt to rapidly changing circumstances, to include the emergence of new or enhanced capabilities.

Perhaps at some point in the history of warfare it was true, as Major Masaitis says, that “we would have no idea whom to target,” without ground-derived intelligence. Regardless, that is not the case today (or even in the recent past). Without a doubt, ground-derived intelligence is valuable, but I believe most people would agree that there are a variety of other sources that also produce targeting information. Indeed, targets have been struck based entirely on information derived from overhead sources.

Should airpower in all its dimensions have been exploited sooner as part of the joint team? Yes. But, practically speaking, some of the most effective technological capabilities that proved key to the successes of 2007 and 2008 simply were not widely available before then.

Precision and persistence do have antecedents from earlier times. What we are seeing now, however, is truly “game changing.” There is no need to rely on my expertise for that proposition: General Barry McCaffrey, USA Retired, concluded in a 2007 report that we have “made a 100-year warfighting leap-ahead with MQ-1 Predator, MQ-9 Reaper, and Global Hawk. Now we have loiter times in excess of 24 hours, persistent eyes on target, micro-kill with Hellfire and 500-pound JDAM bombs, synthetic aperture radar, and a host of ISR sensors and communications potential that have fundamentally changed the nature of warfare.”

Here is another disagreement: Major Masaitis cites the Vietnam War as evidence that an insurgency can defeat US ground forces even if deployed at the force ratios FM 3-24 requires. Wrong. Actually, the Vietnam War was won not by insurgents, but rather by regular North Vietnamese troops who carried the bulk of the fighting after the Viet Cong guerrillas were virtually destroyed in the 1968 Tet offensive. When North Vietnamese armored units rolled into Saigon in 1975 to achieve victory, the war was fully conventional and—importantly—US combat forces were long gone.

The major’s contentions regarding collateral damage are a bit hard to follow, but suffice to say, my point is that today’s technology (which involves more than just munitions) enables the discriminate application of airpower to a degree which was virtually impossible a relatively short time ago, and this has profound implications for COIN. I have detailed much of this in my monograph on airpower in COIN found at <http://aupress.au.af.mil/121007dunlap.pdf>.

Colonel Jogerst’s critique is different. Actually, I agree with much of what he says (and he says it much more articulately than I could). To be clear, I am not advocating an “airpower-centric” solution, per se, what I am saying is that an excessively “ground-centric” solution to the military piece of COIN is not the optimal strategy for the United States. Decisionmakers should be provided options beyond putting masses of American troops on the ground. The ground effort, as I

think Colonel Jogerst would agree, ought to be indigenous forces assisted by small numbers of US experts (hence, I am a supporter of John Nagl's "advisory corps" proposal). US airpower, logistics, and technical support can strengthen and complement indigenous operations.

If obliged to pick a "centric" tag, I would suggest—for many reasons—that an American approach to COIN should be more "technology-centric." Technology does more than just produce better, more discrete kinetics; it has great potential to significantly advance a host of military activities, including intelligence-gathering and psychological operations, especially in cyberspace. Americans have real technological prowess, and we ought to take advantage of that.

Here is where Colonel Jogerst and I may disagree: I believe that "killing and capturing" has much more to do with successful COIN operations than is fashionable to say today. Ditto for countering outside support to insurgents from nation-states. In other words, while there is not a purely "military" solution to modern COIN challenges, the "military" piece is far more important than many observers want to think.

Concerning Building Partnership Capacity (BPC), I totally support it in conjunction with ground forces. My point is that BPC should not be the centerpiece of American COIN doctrine with respect to the air weapon. Regarding BPC as applied to airpower, the reality is that despite a huge effort, it had nothing to do with the United States' COIN success in Iraq since the surge. Building an indigenous airpower capability may have other rationales, but we should not expect it to make much of a contribution to every, or even most, COIN fights.

Major General Charles J. Dunlap, Jr.

Waging Communication War

To the Editor:

In the Summer 2008 issue of *Parameters*, Dr. Kenneth Payne provided an excellent article, "Waging Communication War." I took issue, however, with one item in his otherwise insightful article.

Dr. Payne is somewhat critical of the RAND study suggesting the "US military should learn from the marketing industry." He essentially writes that marketing and advertising are one and the same activity. I believe this is an incorrect assertion; by equating marketing with advertising, Payne is misleading readers on the value of marketing and undermining the validity of the study.

In military terms, marketing could be thought of as how the military defines, promotes, and distribute its product or service and maintains a relationship with customers. Marketing is much more in-depth than just advertising, which is a tool used in marketing to reach audiences, but is not the end-all, be-all of marketing. If more US military leaders were to think in terms of marketing strategies, which encompass advertising, communication strategies, and customer relations

among other things, then the United States might be better prepared and possibly much more effective at waging a communication war.

Payne's witty comment about the US military incorporating marketing strategies seems even more ironic when later he writes, "Information warfare . . . requires a broader understanding of enemy capabilities and the attitudes of populations . . . Today, what is required is detailed cultural and psychological data, which can then be processed, analyzed, and shared using all the technology that the military can muster." The concepts Payne expounds are fundamental to marketing 101—know who your customers are, know your competition, and develop communication plans to reach out to your potential customers while highlighting your company's strengths and benefits over your competition. The most effective marketing campaigns are simple, direct, focused, and regularly self-evaluated.

If Coke and McDonald's can enter markets such as China, India, and the Middle East so successfully, then why doesn't the US military look into how these companies did it. Granted, sodas and hamburgers are not the same products or service provided by the military; however, the techniques for reaching a target audience are. The point is, these companies have identified their competitors (understanding of enemy capabilities) and defined their potential customers (detailed cultural and psychological data) in their target markets. In this respect, what is the difference? It is in the way we think about and approach the problem, whether burgers, sodas, or the military providing essential services and security.

Payne's dismissal of the military "enlisting Madison Avenue" is an error. The military is learning, as Payne points out, that radical new approaches are required to wage a communication war. The way the author chooses to portray marketing and advertising as the same is a grave error and incredibly misleading. Readers should be thinking more, not less, about incorporating lessons from marketing into the military. I would even go so far as to argue the US military would be more effective if it incorporated marketing lessons and techniques into its schools for professional communication officers (psychological operations, public affairs, and information operations) as well as senior service colleges.

I applaud Dr. Payne for writing an insightful article, articulating the past, current, and future challenges of waging communication war, especially with the latest publication of Field Manual 3-0 devoting an entire chapter to information superiority. These are relevant and timely issues that should be discussed and debated at all levels.

Sergeant First Class Bryan W. Beach
Baltimore, Maryland

The Author Replies:

Sergeant Beach is, of course, right that advertising and marketing are not the same thing and that advertising is a facet of marketing, albeit an important one. I did not mean to suggest that they were identical, and even if I had, I am not convinced that this would constitute a "grave and misleading error." In my only

mention of advertising, I quote Paul Linebarger saying that “advertising succeeds in peacetime precisely because it does not matter.” I am content that the same applies to marketing, too—marketing a consumer product is easier than marketing a political ideology, particularly in a marketplace of heavily armed ideologies.

Happily, though, we both agree nonetheless that marketing is important and, as Sergeant Beach notes, I spend a good deal of time talking about what are essentially marketing techniques. I am certainly not “dismissive” of RAND’s report, which I suggest “is worth close reading” and goes further than many other similar studies.

My key point, though perhaps unlikely to win any awards for originality, is that marketing, and advertising, for that matter, will have limited impact if the product involved is fundamentally flawed; word inevitably gets out. If Coke outperforms US foreign policy in the Middle East, for example, perhaps that has less to do with clever marketing than with the fact that one tastes sweet; the other, all too often, is somewhat sour.

Kenneth Payne

Commentary & Reply Submissions

We invite reader commentaries of up to 1,000 words on articles appearing in *Parameters*. Not all commentaries can be published. For those that are, the author of the article will be invited to provide a reply. Commentaries may be edited to meet style and space constraints. Send to US Army War College, ATTN: *Parameters*, 122 Forbes Ave., Carlisle, PA 17013, or by e-mail to CARL_Parameters@conus.army.mil.
