# The Application of Maneuver Toward Psychology

## An argument for language

### by Matthew Brockman

Whatever label currently defines the Afghan conflict, Marines are on the ground interacting with local populations. The conflict is not the first time America has attempted to resolve local insurgencies; mistakes have been made, and it is not too late to attempt to address those errors. It may be useful to take lessons from the past to prepare for this and future conflicts. Chiefly, through combining the concept of maneuver from *MCDP 1*, (Washington, DC: HQMC, 1997), with the concept of psychology from *Small Wars Manual,* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1940), language emerges as a crucial component towards effectively countering insurgent efforts in the information domain. Where Marines fail to address insurgent motivations, raw kinetic or information operations are likely to result in inefficient wars of attrition.

## Maneuver Warfare

*MCDP 1* divides warfare into those of attrition and those based on maneuver. Attrition warfare is a conflict where the objective is the destruction of resources available to the belligerent. In contrast, maneuver warfare capitalizes on vulnerabilities in the belligerent attack surface and structure. With a small force and limited resources, maneuver is preferable to attrition.

Maneuver entails conducting operations that will yield maximum effect with minimal resource allocation. To do this, intelligence must identify critical

vulnerabilities and centers of gravity. Critical vulnerabilities are areas where a unit can effectively penetrate the belligerent's defenses. Centers of gravity are those areas that are critical to the belligerent's operations. These are two distinct but overlapping sets. Critical vulnerabilities do not necessarily lead to centers of gravity, and centers of gravity do not necessarily have critical vulnerabilities. Where intelligence cannot identify critical vulnerabilities around the belligerent centers of gravity, a leader may either choose to move his forces around until the belligerent opens up a critical vulnerability, or a leader



*Maneuver warfare capitalizes on vulnerabilities in the belligerent attack surface and structure. (Photo by Cpl Elijah Abernathy.)*

might choose to throw brute force at the problem in a battle of attrition.

To help describe critical vulnerabilities, *MCDP 1* introduces the concepts of surfaces and gaps. A gap is something that an element can use to attack the belligerent, and a surface is something that impedes the ability to attack. Surfaces and gaps are dependent upon the tools that are available to exploit them. The forest is a gap that an infantry unit can attack through, whereas a tank battalion would not be able to easily pass through the same forest.

The identification of critical vulnerabilities and centers of gravity is a constant process. Consider a belligerent formation composed of three elements: A, B, and C. Let A and B be supporting efforts and C be the main effort (the main effort is the unit that is intended to achieve the objective of the overall operation, whereas a supporting effort is a unit that allows a leader the option to keep the belligerent from interfering with the main mission). If a unit identifies and exploits a center of gravity, call it CoGa, in the supporting effort A, the elimination of CoGa would disrupt A. However, the elimination of a supporting effort would not have defeated C, which was the belligerent main effort. If a unit spends all its time disrupting the supporting efforts and fails to identify the main effort, the attempt at maneuver begins to approximate a war of attrition. These concepts apply to the psychological aspect of war the same as they do to the physical aspects.

### Psychology in Warfare

The term psychology here refers to those beliefs and customs that drive a population toward civil unrest. For dealing with insurgencies, *Small Wars Manual* Paragraph 1-13.g argues that the original cause of the belligerents is rarely the result of a widespread conspiracy, although there may be the rare case that there is a concerted effort by a single party to seize power such as a foreign government attempting to overthrow an unfriendly regime. Often, unrest springs up on its own and perceived high-value individuals are a reflection of the general sentiment rather than the cause. As expressed



*Destruction of available resources is a goal of attrition warfare.* (Photo by LCpl Tyler Solak.)

in paragraph 1-13.i, these motivations are often a result of abuses of power by the governing officials. Paragraph 1-13.l suggests changing the belligerent cost-benefit analysis, simultaneously making the price of revolution exceedingly high while also addressing the factors leading to the unrest, with the caveat that there is often difficulty determining the cause of disorder. It is here in the cost-benefit calculation that the principles of maneuver discussed above can be applied.

### Applying Maneuver to Psychology

Just as maneuver in ground warfare requires understanding enemy positions and capabilities to identify enemy centers of gravity and critical vulnerabilities, maneuver in psychology requires an understanding of the belligerent mindset. When a population has been enflamed by a common griev-

ance, this presents a center of gravity that a unit can attempt to remediate with efficient results. If the unit merely targets belligerent leaders, new leaders

will appear because the underlying grievances remain unresolved. Leaders, with the aid of intelligence, needs to understand the belligerents' motivation enough to determine what drives them to use force. This is not an easy task because there is no guarantee that the belligerents themselves are aware of the subtle issues that caused their insurrection in the first place. The problem of being able to understand the concepts and beliefs of a population has been rephrased countless times throughout history and will become more complex with growing populations and available information.

Understanding others' motivations has never been easy. Consider the "Allegory of the Cave" from Plato in Book VII of *The Republic*. A group of prisoners spend their entire lives in a cave in such a way that they only see

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shadows on a wall. The prisoners give names and purpose to the images that they see. Eventually, a prisoner breaks free from his bonds and walks outside

*Marines should at least have a rudimentary language skill.* (Photo by GySgt Charles McKelvey.)

and can see things because they are in sunlight. When the prisoner goes back into the cave to explain the world to his fellow prisoners, he will encounter two difficulties. First, the prisoner has to convince the remaining prisoners that there is more to the world than the shadows on the wall. Secondly, and equally important, the prisoner will have difficulty adjusting to the darkness and will appear to be uninformed because he is no longer adjusted to life in the cave. Paralleling this allegory, an Afghan commander recently presented the problem of two frogs in a well.[1] One frog (the Afghan) has always lived in the well and another (the American) just fell in. While the new frog knows all about the nice life in the bright outside world, this knowledge is useless in the dark.

The difficulties of understanding others' viewpoints will only grow with time. It is not a matter of people not wanting to learn. As Dr. Robert Oppenheimer argued 50 years ago, everyone spends their life specializing in their own trade, and it is inevitable that they remain oblivious to most of the knowledge generated by the rest of humanity.[2] As society gets more complex, people within a given society will have different perceptions of the world from one another, leading to potential conflict—we all end up as prisoners back in Plato's cave unable to fully understand one another. This is especially relevant to foreign conflicts, as leaders require an understanding of motivations for calculating belligerent cost-benefit analysis.

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Understanding and dealing with belligerent motivation is a problem in its own right, but historical lessons teach that the first step to doing so is learning the local language. Looking back to *Small Wars Manual*, Paragraph 1.15 of the manual states,

> Political methods and motives which govern the actions of foreign people and their political parties, incomprehensible at best to the average North American, are practically beyond the understanding of persons who do not speak their language. If not already familiar with the language, all officers upon assignment to expeditionary duty should study and acquire a working knowledge of it.

Continuing later, paragraph 1-28 states,

> The satisfactory solution of problems involving civil authorities and civil population requires that all ranks be familiar with the language, the geography, and the political, social, and economic factors involved in the country in which they are operating.

Common sense also indicates that if the Marines want to avoid becoming the conventional "Ugly American," Marines who are in daily contact with the local populations should have at least a rudimentary grasp of the language and culture.[3] However, an understanding of the conduct of war and a willingness to use requisite force is still necessary. After all, the belligerent will usually have a native command of the language and culture so an understanding of these subjects is merely a matter of helping to put the Marines on equal footing.

## Conclusion

Attention to language is a necessary preparation to help bridge the cultural gap between the Marines and the local population, which is essential to mitigating potential insurgencies. However, training language by itself is not sufficient to defeat belligerent ideology. Units on the ground must still identify centers of gravity in the belligerent mindset, and then identify gaps and surfaces that impact exploitation of the centers of gravity. If leaders choose to forgo language training for their units, they increase the probability that they will end up fighting a war of attrition.

### Notes

1. Carl Forsling, "Everything I Really Need to Know I Learned from Afghans," *Small Wars Journal*, (Bethesda, MD: Small Wars Foundation, February 2013).

2. KD, "Interview with J. Robert Oppenheimer-See It Now," YouTube video, 26:55, (September 2014), available at https://www.youtube.com.

3. William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick, *The Ugly American*, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1958). It is a political novel which depicts the failures of the U.S. diplomatic corps in Southeast Asia.

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