Commandant's Note

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Urban Counterinsurgency: Seizing the Opportunity

The current level of insurgent activity in Iraq has stimulated a great deal of discussion and consideration of how we can best fight and defeat an urban insurgency marked by hit and run ambushes, sniping, the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and an enemy's disregard for collateral casualties and damage to the host nation and her people. We closely observe our adversary, learning his tactics, techniques, and procedures, and we employ our own ambushes and innovative methods to seize every opportunity to destroy him before he is ready to strike.

America is a nation at war, and as we train, deploy, and fight we are engaged in collecting vital information from warriors in the global war on terror. We glean information from units preparing to deploy, from those engaged in combat, and from those recently returned. At the Infantry School we have daily discourse in our classrooms with those who have fought and defeated the urban insurgent in close combat. Over 70 percent of our captains in the career course and 80 percent of our NCOs in the NCO Academy bring firsthand combat experience from either Iraq or Afghanistan, and in some cases both. We are busy considering their ideas and the lessons they have learned and are eager to share with their contemporaries. Concurrent with these internal efforts, the Infantry Traveling Team has been conducting post combat surveys with returning units and following up with field visits to develop recurring trends distilled from their feedback. We have ramped up our exchange with other countries currently fighting their own insurgencies to capture other perspectives on protracted struggles against resilient and determined enemies. Not surprisingly, there are some recurring trends echoing from each of these sources.

One such trend is our struggle for certainty in an uncertain, complex, and dynamic environment while fighting multiple asymmetric threats. Despite the urban insurgents' inherent advantages of mobility, local knowledge, and their own propaganda efforts, we continue our efforts to stabilize the country and region, capitalizing on our own strengths and exploiting weaknesses to enable host nation forces and agencies to establish and sustain viable democratic systems. Without fail, every briefing I have seen on the urban environment lists its challenges, but few if any talk about its advantages. Besides the obvious logistical advantages, the compactness of the urban terrain places families, clans and tribes — all with their own interests and agendas — in close proximity to one another, something that facilitates both the dissemination of accurate host nation information and the gathering of intelligence on enemy presence and intentions.

In fact, our own history shows us how General George Crook used cultural awareness and his understanding of conflicting interests within the tribal population to gather intelligence and create and seize opportunities during his successful campaigns against the Apaches in our own country during the last quarter of the 19th Century. He was able to do this even without the benefit of the clearly delineated religious and tribal lines and relationships we see in Iraq today, and he accomplished it by enlisting the aid of groups within the Apaches themselves, much as we are working in close cooperation with Iraqi civil and military authorities. In Iraq we are fighting more than just insurgents with family and tribal ties, and we are actively supporting Iraq's initiatives to create a unified state unimpeded by internal dissension. Although the foreign fighters and terrorists whom we face may be bound by greed, desire for political dominance, or simply a mutual hatred of the United States and the stability she implies, to Iraqis they are outsiders. It is these insurgents who are the dissident element, and we need to identify the rivalries, conflicting interests, and the differing objectives of these diverse enemies so that we — and our Iraqi allies — can effectively exploit them.

Another recurring trend is the frustration of fighting an asymmetric threat. We must wrest that asymmetric advantage

from the enemy by both forcing him to become more symmetric and by becoming more asymmetric ourselves. During our most recent Infantry Conference, commanders just returning from the fight demonstrated ways to do just that. Our moves away from predictability and our ability to recognize the enemy's patterns and tendencies have led to several foiled enemy ambushes. In fact, our more experienced and savvy commanders have even planned and successfully executed counter ambushes based on each enemy's tendencies and predictability. Meanwhile, our leaders at the lowest levels have complemented their doctrinal foundation by demonstrating cunning and ingenuity and by avoiding predictable patterns of behavior on which the enemy could capitalize. These efforts continue; as the enemy attempts to adapt we must stay one step ahead of him.

The final recurring trend we are seeing is our leaders' efforts to balance the need to bring the full effects of our kinetic weapons array to bear on the enemy, while at the same time trying to minimize collateral damage to host nation personnel and infrastructure. We have found that workable solutions to these dilemmas can differ widely. Proximity to the conflict, nature of the insurgency and the tenacity of the enemy, the geopolitical forces, and national will all factor into the way our leaders approach each tactical dilemma. This is quite a burden we place on some of our most inexperienced young leaders. We need to educate and train our subordinates and to trust their judgment. Fortunately for us, these adaptive young leaders are typically making the right decisions. Our after action reviews are replete with examples of tactical patience, ingenuity, and collaboration with the local populace to obtain a surrender — just as General Crook so often did during the Indian Wars — instead of arbitrarily applying brute force without regard to collateral damage.

The bottom line is that our leaders understand their responsibilities to their Soldiers and the mission. Likewise, they attempt to protect infrastructure and noncombatants, but they won't risk their Soldiers' lives unnecessarily. As mentioned earlier, one of the advantages of the urban environment is that the enemy's plans, preparations, and actions are difficult for him to conceal from neighbors and bystanders. Allowing insurgents, terrorists, or criminals to operate from your house, apartment building, or neighborhood implies complicity with the enemy, and this carries risk. As the recent election shows, Iraqis want to assume control of their own destiny, and they are providing the intelligence that we and Iraqi police and military are using to tighten the noose around the insurgents. We must reward every assistance and discourage those who would aid our enemy. With that said, we should make every effort to use the appropriate force or tool to accomplish the mission. Moreover, we should attempt restitution for any damage to innocents' property or lives in order to mitigate any propaganda victories for the enemy or inflict undue hardship on the population whose support we are attempting to gain.

These are but a few of the recurring trends we have discovered during our recent collection effort, but they offer a change in mind set that is worth sharing with those joining or rejoining the efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. We have seen our successes as well as our setbacks, but we are steadily gaining ground and replacing chaos with stability. As combat leaders we must look for opportunities even when it appears that the enemy holds all the good cards. The urban environment does have some advantages, especially when we think of its ability to restrict population movements, our opportunity to asymmetrically defeat the enemy, and the ability of adaptive leaders to select from a variety of tools and responses easily tailored for the array of situations found in this complex environment. The question is not whether we will prevail in creating stability in the region; that is already underway, and it is only a matter of time until our goals — and those of a democratic Iraq — are met. We are learning a great deal, and we will continue to share these lessons during the Infantry Traveling Team visits, on the Infantry Forum site, and in future issues of *Infantry* Magazine.

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