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## **Clear, Hold, Build: Modern Political Techniques in COIN**

“Clear, Hold, Build”<sup>1</sup> is the stated policy and doctrine for the US military to succeed in the counterinsurgency fight in Iraq. This paper discusses the leveraging of domestic political campaigning tools as a way to improve the “Clear, Hold, Build” strategy at the Brigade and Battalion level. This paper highlights the role of the S-2 in leveraging some domestic political tools, how these tools might be used, and the importance of using political tools in a localized, proactive, and comprehensive approach.

The “Clear, Hold, Build” method was doctrinally established in FM 3-24 and endorsed by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in 2005:

In short, with the Iraqi Government, our political-military strategy has to be to clear, hold, and build: to clear areas from insurgent control, to hold them securely, and to build durable, national Iraqi institutions.<sup>2</sup>

This tactic, as defined by the 3-24 divided into three phases:

- 1) **Clear** the area by destroying, capturing, or forcing the withdrawal of insurgent combatants
- 2) **Hold** the area with security forces (ideally HN forces), in order to effectively reestablish a HN government presence at the local level

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<sup>1</sup> Graphic from the Author

<sup>2</sup> Rice, Condoleezza. "Iraq and U.S. Policy."

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- 3) **Build** support for the HN government by protecting the populace and improving economic, social, cultural, and medical needs<sup>3</sup>

FM 3-24 provides the commander on the ground considerable freedom in deciding how to implement “Clear, Hold, Build” in his Area of Operations (AO). Importantly, FM 3-24 cites the needs for a coordinated IO campaign at all stages to support the COIN effort. Also, it notes that “the most important activities during the build stage are conducted by nonmilitary agencies.”<sup>4</sup> This statement highlights the importance of coordinating with groups that are not typically associated with military activity, key to this coordination is leveraging assets that allow commanders to understand the social relationships in their AO.

Understanding the environment, including the social dynamics, is key to undertaking a successful “clear, hold, build” strategy. At the tactical level, there are many assets which should be critical in assisting the commander. These assets range from the Soldier on patrol everyday to Human Contact Teams to Special Operation units such as Civil Affairs. These elements are ideal sources of information concerning the different personalities and dynamics that work within a given AO. In a “clear, hold, build” strategy the society relationships are a center of gravity for successful operations. If the relationships can be discerned, then meaningful actions can be undertaken to prevent the insurgents from controlling the AO or intimidating, and resupplying within the AO.

There are political tools and capabilities in the United States that are not traditionally utilized by the military. The importance in a COIN fight of “fighting politically” has been stressed both in the 3-24 and by other commentators, such as John

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<sup>3</sup> FM 3-24 Para 5-51 – 5-78

<sup>4</sup> FM 3-24 Para 5-80

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A. Nagel in “Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife”. In addition, the United States is one of the most politically active countries in the world, yet military commanders are often left without some of the most basic tools any basic “political campaign” would have.

Political expertise, advertising consultants, polling and other metric analysis, and grassroots organizers are part of every successful political campaign, but not currently within the capabilities of the tactical commander. The utilization of domestic political campaign tools could have a dramatic effect on the “clear, hold, build” operations.

Political expertise is most evident in the domestic political area when it is used to formulate and execute a comprehensive plan for a given neighborhood – often called “grassroots organization”. This type of organization combines local organizations and political support, advertising and other aspects of Information Operations (IO) to build and maintain political bases of support. For example, a mayor running for reelection would harness his political support and gain endorsements, advertise across a wide spectrum of media (internet, loudspeakers, leaflets etc), and use other types of political actions to highlight his contribution and usefulness. Modern successful political campaigns combine organization, unity of message, integrated advertising, and utilization of existing political structures. This expertise should be utilized in “building” popular support and political will in the COIN environment.

The importance of IO is not overlooked in FM 3-24: “Commanders can use IO to increase popular support”<sup>5</sup> FM 3-24 goes on to specify that different groups need different messages. The same was observed in America’s political landscape and is epitomized by former House Speaker Tip O’Neill’s comment “All politics is local.” Therefore, the local commander on the ground must create and implement an IO strategy

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<sup>5</sup> FM 3-24 Para 5-76

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particular to his AO. For an IO strategy, to be effective, it must be tailored to the target audience, operational tempo, and cultural landscape. In a domestic political campaign the “message”, or central theme of the campaign, is at the center, while all other actions support it. A campaign is said to have “gotten off track” or “failed” when it has gotten “off message”. An action that does not support the message, or theme of the campaign, or one that is not publicized, is not useful. All actions support and are supported by the “IO” (advertising) campaign in order to be effective in building and maintaining supporters. This approach is similar to the one used by the insurgents: their actions are often filmed and put on the internet. Actions that do not support their message – one where US forces succeed – are not publicized or are subject to counter-propaganda.

The US has some of the most sought after media and advertising consultants in the world. If the military were to seek out this expertise and harness it more effectively, at the Brigade and below level, combine it with local expertise and then craft messages – a process well understood in advertising and especially political advertising – their IO campaigns would be more effective.

Leveraging local political knowledge would not take the form of dispatching New York City ad executives to a combat zone. Instead, the process of message development would take place leveraging the Army’s communication technology, combined with on the ground knowledge and native expertise and resources to create effective messages. This can be done by possibly networking Battalions and Brigades with domestic political consultants. Implementation and feedback would then be used to refine the message and make it even more effective. The pairing of civilian expertise to military need has already taken place, with several programs, such as the Human Terrain Team, which

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places cultural anthropologists and sociologists to offer “cultural intelligence” to the commander, and USAID’s Office of Military Affairs.

The inherently political nature of a COIN fight makes the use of tools usually used by politics particularly appropriate. One of the most visible, and useful tools is the poll. The poll takes many forms in modern politics and serves many purposes. The most well known is the poll that indicates the popularity of one candidate or another.

However, in a typical political campaign there are many more “internal” polls that indicate how a target audience feels about the candidate and issues; these polls are used to “leverage” issues into political support for the candidate. Polls are also not only informative; the “push-poll” is a poll designed not to inform, but to sway the audience being polled by posing hypothetical questions about the opposition. For example, a push poll question might be “would you support candidate X if you found out that he was indicted for fraud in the 1980s?”

The Tactical Conflict Assessment Framework (TCAF) is a program developed by the USAID Office of Military Affairs (OMA):

The TCAF is a simple and standardized diagnostic tool used to gather information from local inhabitants to identify the causes of instability or conflict in a unit’s area of operation.<sup>6</sup>

The framework pairs a short questionnaire (poll) with detailed analysis to determine, along with other sources of intelligence, the causes of instability / insurgency in the area.<sup>7</sup>

After analysis, programs are developed that “increase support for the government, decrease support for the insurgents, and increase governmental capability and capacity.”<sup>8</sup>

The TCAF is a good example of how common tools used in other areas of politics can be used in the most “political” fight the military engages in, counterinsurgency. The

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<sup>6</sup> Derleth, James. The Tactical Conflict Assessment Framework

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

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TCAF pairs the capabilities of the military to physically encounter the population on a regular basis, analyze, collate, exploit data, and synthesize it into a product used for planning. This discipline is at the core of the S2 function in “clear, hold, build”, but with an expanded set of tools and methodologies.

The ground commander has enormous leeway in a COIN fight. “Clear, Hold, Build” is the political/military strategy selected by the civilian political leaders such as Secretary of State Rice, and is a stated doctrine of the US Army in the 3-24. In “Clear, Hold, Build” Information Operations are very important. The ground commander has a wide range of tools at his disposal. Adding tools used by domestic political campaigns – “messaging”, grassroots organizations, and polling, to this set of tools would make units even more effective. The US is one of the world leaders in political campaigning, and the use of America’s political expertise is a logical step in the continued development of COIN doctrine and implementation.

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