Best two out of three?

With their strategy in Iraq having largely failed to date, the Americans are hoping their latest counter-insurgency holds the answer. But if recess in elementary school taught us anything, rock doesn't always win

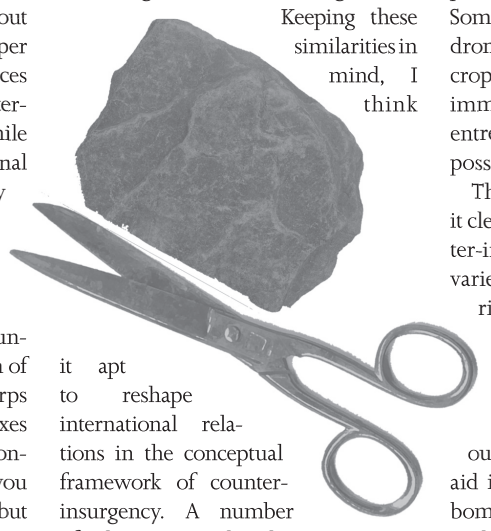
GRAHAM LETTNER

After failing to quell the insurgency in Iraq with traditional military operations—about as senseless as insisting that paper beats scissors—the coalition forces have belatedly adopted a counter-insurgency strategy. Apparently, while insurgency confounds conventional military tactics, counter-insurgency trumps insurgency. But it remains to be seen if this change of strategy wasn't too far past overdue to effect real positive change.

An early document of the new counter-insurgency strategy was a section of the American Army and Marine Corps field manual outlining nine paradoxes of counter-insurgency. Each point contains the kind of earthy wisdom you could expect to hear from Sun Tzu, but never in the War on Terror rhetoric.

Effectively put into practice, one could find hope for improvement in the situation in Iraq. But while military strategies evolve to adapt to the new reality of conflict, an idea transcending the current struggle there is whether a similar adaptation of strategy can be applied to international affairs.

There are many similarities between international conflicts and the insurgency in Iraq: hostility often based in ethnic differences; root causes encompassing economic inequity and historical injustices; non-state actors using increasingly powerful violent means. There are also many similarities between international powers and the coalition in Iraq: overwhelming resources and technological power; vulnerability to non-traditional, non-military tactics; and a lack of cultural knowledge and understanding.



Keeping these similarities in mind, I think it apt to reshape international relations in the conceptual framework of counter-insurgency. A number of the points listed in the Army's paradoxes of counter-insurgency help to illustrate the usefulness of this altered approach.

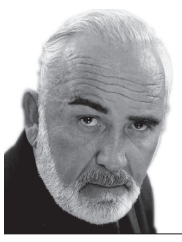
The first point states that the more you protect your force, the less secure you are. In Iraq this means appearing to be running scared and ceding the initiative to insurgents. In the West, it means misplaced faith in national security measures (think the recently implemented Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative) and creating a maladaptive Us-vs-Them mentality. Instead, open lines of engagement should be preserved in order to build common understanding and common values.

Another paradox states that the more force is used, the less effective it is. More force means more collateral damage, which gives more fuel to insurgents who denounce occupying powers. Internationally, air strikes in Somalia, assassinations by unmanned drones or aerial spraying of poppy crops in Afghanistan all have limited immediate benefit, yet foster and entrench opposition, and undermine possible local support.

The Army's field manual also makes it clear that the best weapons for counter-insurgency aren't of the shooting variety. Overwhelming military superiority is tempting to use, but considering that positive reception of the victims of natural disasters in Banda Aceh, Indonesia or Bam, Iran, it's fairly obvious that generously donated and wisely distributed aid is more effective than any smart bomb in building lasting support and undermining negative sentiments that could be the seeds of terrorism.

There are six other paradoxes contained in the field manual, all of them proving that conventional military action doesn't succeed in an insurgency situation. It's not so hard to comprehend that no matter how hard rock tries, paper still wins every time. The difficult thing to comprehend is why it takes so long to learn the lessons we were taught at recess in kindergarten.

We're not as tolerant as we think



TREVOR LARSON

In recent decades, Canada has prided itself for being a tolerant nation. We've promoted multiculturalism in our society, be it in the education curriculum or through support of different social networks that encourage the promotion of one's cultural heritage.

Just this last year, the government followed through on plans to reimburse Chinese-Canadians who were forced to pay a head-tax upon entering the country years ago. While in most regards the social structure of Canada continues to try and eliminate prejudices minorities face in our country, there's been a subtle yet disturbing trend in the minds of some Canadians: that being an almost accepted racism towards people of Middle-Eastern descent.

I can't count the number of times I've heard people, some of whom I dearly respect, make comments alluding to stereotypes that Muslims are terrorists. Since 9/11, these stereotypes have become more and more prevalent. Unfortunately, Islam's name has been dragged through the mud, as the actions of a few men and countries have allowed many to label Islam as radical. However, the radical beliefs of a few aren't indicative of the entire religion.

When one thinks of a Christian, the first thing that comes to mind isn't the Christian extremists who killed abortion doctors and blew up abortion clinics in the US in the '90s. So why is this belief that Islam means terrorism so common? Part of this can perhaps be attributed to the lack of knowledge the layman has in regards to Islam—this is where the curriculum in schools can affect the minds of future Canadians in hopes that they don't form similar prejudices.

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If the study of Islam can be incorporated as a unit into a social studies or religion course, students, whether they go on to postsecondary school or finish at a diploma, can have a basic understanding of what is in fact a beautiful religion. They can understand that violence is no more ingrained in the tenets of Islam than Christianity, and gain an increased understanding of other cultures allows one to see through the stereotypes that are attributed to them.

Apart from education, in order to prevent prejudices against Muslims, Canadians need to be mindful of government policy decisions, especially those in regards to national security. You can't tell me that increased searches at airports are completely random. Airport security officers are taught to look for threats and suspicious-looking people—and with today's stereotypes, what's more suspicious than a person who appears to be of Middle-Eastern descent?

More transparency into these matters is therefore necessary. The public needs to know if a proportionately higher amount of Muslims are being pulled aside for extra searches. We cannot allow for cases like Maher Arar's deportation and subsequent torture to happen again. The people involved need to be held accountable for what happened to him. Policy needs to be set forth to make sure such a travesty of justice doesn't happen again.

Don't get me wrong, security is important, but is it worth it at the cost of losing our ideals as a democracy? Canada as a supporter of human rights and justice throughout the world needs to make sure that it remains shining example of a just society. The last 50 years have been a period of substantial growth in the ideals of tolerance and respect for peoples of different cultures and races; we cannot allow a few events to turn back the clock to discrimination of our fellow citizens.