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Keeping COIN Simple: the Outhouse Strategy for Security Development

Herb Daniels

As US armed forces execute the Global War on Terror, varying strategies are required to facilitate victory within those sovereign states that are hesitant to permit a significant number of US personnel on their soil. The Philippines is an excellent example of how the US military can still achieve victory while under severe operational constraints imposed by a host government. US advisors working with the Armed Forces of the Philippines are developing creative and unconventional counter-insurgency (COIN) strategies to win the support of the local population and to sever their links to the indigenous Abu Sayyaf Group. The ‘outhouse strategy’ discussed herein is indicative of the peculiarities of unconventional warfare.

In March of 1906, a US military contingent led by Army Colonel J. W. Duncan assaulted the mountain stronghold of Bud Dajo and crushed the last significant holdout of Moro insurrectionists on the tiny island of Jolo in the southern Philippines.ⁱ 100 years later, at the village of Kabanatuan Tiis near the site of the famous battle, the commander of an Armed Force of the Philippines (AFP) infantry battalion observed the commemorative ceremonies marking the Moro defeat. Despite the “celebratory” nature of the festivities, it was a somber occasion. He was quietly reminded by local civic leaders (who’s forbearers had done battle with Colonel Duncan’s unit), of the indiscriminate slaughter perpetrated by the US forces. Accompanying the AFP commander was a recently arrived team of US Army advisors. These men would become the first US personnel to live in the municipality of Talipao (population of 75,000)ⁱⁱ since the end of the Moro insurrection nearly 100 years earlier. The AFP and US commanders were confronted by a new insurgency on Jolo by the indigenous Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and their

international supporters, the Al Qaeda-affiliated group Jemaah Islamiah (JI). As both commanders discussed their options, neither could have guessed that a simple public building in common use since the days of the Roman Empire – the lowly outhouse – would serve as an unusual starting point, and ultimately as a vital tool for earning the trust and support of the local citizenry in their sector of terrorist-plagued Jolo.

The False Promise of Building Schools

The Joint Special Operations Task Force – Philippines (JSOTF-P), first established in 2002, was responsible for providing resources and manpower to assist the government of the Philippines in its fight against the ASG and JI in the Sulu Archipelago, with initial focus on the island of Basilan. In 2005, after largely routing the ASG on Basilan, the JSOTF-P moved specialized teams of American personnel to advise and assist the AFP military units assigned to the nearby island of Jolo. One such team was assigned to an AFP battalion with an area of responsibility encompassing the Municipality of Talipao. Talipao is Jolo Island's largest municipality in terms of square kilometers and second largest population. It consists of 53 villages scattered across 165 square kilometers.ⁱⁱⁱ The team of US advisors provided several capabilities to assist the AFP Battalion to include increased intelligence support, improved communications and tactical and technical training for combat operations.

Because US forces were strictly prohibited by the Philippine government from engaging in direct combat operations, their greatest weapon became humanitarian resources designed to improve the livelihood of the people on Jolo while at the same time giving the AFP/US military personnel access to the local community.^{iv} On Jolo humanitarian resources would be used with varying degrees of success depending upon the targeted population and the type of project. Since the ASG and JI on Jolo were illusive and combat engagements infrequent, humanitarian projects quickly became the preferred method to engage the local population and to sever their links to the insurgents and terrorists.

The high demand for humanitarian assistance on Jolo and limited funds created a competitive environment amongst the US advisory teams to acquire and execute a finite amount of development

projects. This “resource gap” was further influenced by perceptions in higher headquarters of which locales should receive the greatest allocation of humanitarian assistance. Jolo City as the only densely populated urban center on the island (and headquarters of the JSOTF-P Forward)^v was judged to be the center of gravity for the COIN campaign. As a result, it and the surrounding villages received a greater proportion of humanitarian assistance.

Humanitarian projects varied in size and cost but most often they focused on education or health care. The highest-profile projects were full-blown community centers, complexes equipped with meeting halls, his-and-her restrooms, and well apportioned open-air pavilions. There were also a few high-impact projects coordinated through Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs), the most prominent in 2006 being computer labs that included satellite internet access. At first glance, all these projects appeared to be ideal for the island of Jolo, but after a few months it was clear they had contributed very little to severing the links between the populace and the insurgents.

The false promise of building schools is a prime example. Schools already existed in abundance on Jolo. Nearly every village had a school, and almost every child on the island was no more than a 30 minute walk to a classroom. While at first glance the construction-style of the average school house on Jolo may pale with Western brick and mortar buildings, the modest structures on Jolo were more than adequate for basic education. The common form of local construction consisted of a clay or concrete floor with bamboo walls and palm branch roofs, the exception being schools located in any of the island’s ten municipal centers and Jolo City. Although seemingly rudimentary, this local construction approach was ideal in a tropical jungle setting, with the bamboo walls and palm roofs allowing air to circulate through classrooms. Either could be easily repaired or replaced using local resources, with minimal expense and labor. This local style of construction does not require technical experts for repairs, and no additional costs are required to maintain the schoolhouse. Probably the greatest deficiencies in the local schools were the poor condition of the locally constructed desks and chairs, the moldering textbooks, and crumbling chalkboards.

However, in 2005-2006, Philippine and US authorities decided that building new schools was critical to winning hearts and minds. All new schools are larger, usually between three and five rooms and the floors and walls are made from steel reinforced concrete. Compared to a standard village school, the new project schools are impressive but their functional value to students and teachers is actually less. This construction type required experts from off-island to build the school, and thus provided minimal benefit to the local labor force through job opportunities. The materials used were all imported from off-island and provided no benefit to local industries or merchants. Once built, the classrooms often became ovens during the hot humid afternoons because the concrete walls stifled the movement of air, and the small windows were covered in glass. Worst yet were the tin roofs that either radiated heat throughout the classroom when the sun was shining, or which deafened the students during the rain.

Unfortunately, some of the impressive new classrooms went unused because new teachers were not allocated by the number of classrooms, but by the size of the student population. Within a very short time, the community began to incur a fiscal burden to maintain the new schools. Windows were quickly broken or vandalized, (no doubt to the relief of the students and teachers who appreciated the ventilation). Painted walls both inside and out began to peel in the humidity, and the exposed concrete rapidly deteriorated, crumbling away, bit by bit. Tin roofs were damaged by falling trees and coconuts and could not be replaced without hiring outside experts at greater expense. Saddest of all, the very real distractions to learning were never addressed; within the big new schools, the students remained seated in locally fashioned chairs and desks, and used the same moldy and outdated textbooks.

However, the completion of every school was a major media and political event, with dignitaries from the US and Philippine governments often flying to the island from as far as Manila for the dedication. Despite the fanfare, in truth, most of the new schools were a civil-military failure. Because they were located primarily in the more densely populated areas, these construction projects did not increase military access to the rural populations where the insurgents operated. These school projects

required no protracted involvement of the AFP/US forces in the area, and therefore provided no ongoing opportunity to influence the population and target the population's linkages to the insurgents.

An Alternative COIN Approach - Outhouses

Focusing the bulk of humanitarian assistance on the urban center of Jolo City did expose a large number of people to government relief efforts. Regrettably, doing so also failed to target the population that was most closely linked to the insurgency. Insurgent groups in the Philippines do not operate routinely within or around the population centers. Insurgents mainly use the hinterland; the sparsely populated and underdeveloped rural regions for their freedom of movement, for quartering, and for re-supply. Support for the insurgents comes from those populations that have little or no interaction with the Philippine government or its security forces. Generally, Philippine forces are concentrated near population centers where the extended government presence is also strongest. Insurgents, strongest in less-dense rural areas, are at greater risk when they enter population centers. As a result, to be effective in defeating any insurgency, economic development projects must be targeted at those specific populations which provide support for insurgents within the rural regions most frequented by them.^{vi} Maimbung, a small village of about 1000 residents in the Municipality of Talipao, provided an excellent opportunity to target such a population through humanitarian projects.

In early 2006, the first goal of AFP/US forces in Talipao was to deny the insurgents' access to the municipality by targeting the key movement routes. Jolo Island's primary East-West highway ran directly through the middle of Talipao and was linked to many tertiary roads that connected all of the large towns and villages throughout the island. Certain restrictive natural terrain features, combined with the location of population centers, made insurgent movement corridors very predictable. The initial assessment made by AFP/US commanders about the insurgent activity in these corridors was soon confirmed by intelligence gathered from the local police, residents, and Talipao government officials. Targeting the insurgents' movement corridors would help isolate rural villages from ASG's influence and would deny the terrorists basic logistic supply from within Talipao.

The combination of topographic and demographic factors suggested that a AFP/US military presence in just a few “choke-point” locations would significantly diminish insurgent access to (and thereby their influence over) the local population. After limiting insurgent access, AFP/US military personnel could then proceed to implement a variety of basic development projects. Building these projects gave military personnel access throughout Talipao, but any projects had to satisfy a legitimate need of the population.^{vii}

The AFP/US commanders believed a unique project was necessary to achieve all the effects that the “modern” school projects had failed to provide. The project had to involve the village leadership in its planning and execution as well as the local AFP commander, who served as the Philippine central government’s representative to the locality. The project needed to encourage community participation and be resourced by materials that could be secured locally. The complexity of the project had to be minimal so that all expertise could be obtained from the village or from villagers working in tandem with soldiers in the AFP/US units. Most important, after the project’s completion, the AFP/US personnel needed to maintain continuous access to the village in order to ensure local support and to deter insurgent activity over time. Large projects, such as new school complexes, were inappropriate since the small villages had no use for large structures (nor the ability to maintain them). After due consideration, and after long discussion between the Philippine commander and his US partner, the final project, the one that was determined to provide the greatest benefits at the least cost to the local populace, was a re-creation of ancient Rome’s lowly commode, known to generations of Americans as the outhouse.

Outhouses were not common on Jolo. The norm for locals in the rural villages of the Talipao municipality is to use the woods or streams. Apparently, “modern” alternatives have never been considered (nor adopted), and the hygienic benefits of outhouses had never been explained to the locals. Of course, it was understood by the villagers that feces and urine were dirty and malodorous, but the severe health risks incurred from routine exposure to human waste were not clearly understood. The villager leaders, with a healthy dose of skepticism, agreed that an innovative adaptation might be

explored. Cautiously, with memories of 1906 in the back of their collective minds, they agreed to accommodate a new “development project” as proposed by the US and AFP military personnel.

Once the village leadership was convinced that a civil-military project was perhaps in their interest, the AFP/US commanders presented village leaders with the idea of the outhouse. The initial distrust of the AFP/US military personnel by the local villagers began to dissipate as members of the community increasingly believed in the genuine concern expressed by the soldiers for the welfare of the village. In short order, a positive relationship started to form; with the village leadership embracing the plan to improve village hygiene that would be of the greatest benefit to the children. The outhouse was the “carrot” to win village support in lieu of the “stick.”^{viii} Very few of the villagers routinely used toilets except those who had frequented Jolo City and had experienced the delights (comparatively) of this “modern” convenience. Toilets, being an artifact of the “city folk” were an uncommon luxury in rural Philippine villages such as Maimbung, and they existed nowhere in Talipao (except for the Municipal office compound, which few villagers ever ventured to set foot in).

To the Maimbung village leadership, an outhouse was deemed a symbol of status as well as a means of improving village hygiene, and the village as a whole quickly accepted the idea of an outhouse. In nearly all Philippine villages, schools are located near the village center, and adjacent to the roads. Since it was decided that children would benefit most from the outhouse, the outhouse would be built near the schools. While this was most beneficial to the village, the strategic location was also critical to AFP/US success in the village. Since the outhouse was near the road, all who passed through the village would see it, including any individuals who’s natural affiliation might be with insurgents. This was “free advertising” for the AFP/US forces and placed them squarely in the epicenter of daily villager activity.

Military vehicles are foreign to the Jolo jungle. Any military vehicle is easily spotted by all who pass nearby, and word of the AFP/US presence in the village spread immediately. Not only did this presence deter enemy activity around the village, it also clearly indicated the possibility for the village’s support of the AFP/US forces. This began the process of isolating the insurgents from the villagers, and

the insurgents, before risking future engagement with the village's inhabitants, had to carefully consider who within the village might have become agents for the AFP/US.

Inside the Outhouse: the local COIN Strategy

To maximize the benefits of the outhouse for the village, everything was done locally, with no exceptions. The outhouse was not treated as a gift but rather as a project for unifying the village with the AFP/US units. Together, all parties built the outhouse using local volunteers from the village and AFP/US soldiers. Working side-by-side relationships quickly developed between the villagers and the soldiers; barriers dissolved and trust emerged. Soon, villagers were bringing their children to the US medical clinic located on the AFP camp; social events were organized; and official business was routinely discussed between the AFP commander and the village leadership, permitting a channel for villagers to peacefully voice their grievances.

As the deep hole for the outhouse neared completion, it was necessary to plan for materials to complete the surface construction. Committed to empowering local involvement, the AFP commander solicited support from the Talipao municipality leadership. Within a day, the Mayor of Talipao arranged for the purchase and delivery of cinder blocks to line the outhouse pit, cement, and reinforcing steel for the floor. Encouraged by the mayor's generosity, the village leaders collected bamboo and palm branches for the walls and roof. Finally, the AFP/US donated pressure treated lumber, left over from earlier projects, to frame the structure and, most importantly, squat commodes were contributed by a Muslim Medical NGO.

The entirety of the project took nearly a month and cost the AFP/US nothing but time - time spent developing bonds between the villagers and the AFP, opening means of communication to share information on enemy activity. Local support of the AFP/US provided benefits to the village that years of interaction with ASG had failed to achieve. Through the lowly outhouse, village hygiene was greatly improved and opportunities for future projects could be discussed, thus establishing a stronger

relationship between the village and the AFP/US. The outhouse strategy (keeping development projects simple) was undeniably a success in Maimbung.

The first outhouse was built next to a highly trafficked road that gained the attention of all persons passing by. As the AFP/US were planning the next outhouse location, several nearby village leaders had approached the AFP camp expressing their desire to construct one for their village. In some cases, villages demonstrated their sincerity by coordinating for volunteers and materials in advance. The AFP commander decided that multiple outhouse projects would be executed simultaneously to increase the spread of AFP influence, and to also keep the insurgents guessing at the AFP priorities. Four projects were initiated, with one AFP infantry squad assigned to each project site, augmented with an AFP human intelligence specialist. The squad lived, ate and worked with the villagers from the start of the project to its completion, and the AFP/US leadership made routine visits to each site, developing stronger bonds with each village's leadership.

As the number of projects increased, growing support from the population was evident through the sharing of information on insurgent activity. The AFP battalion commander estimated that credible human intelligence on insurgent activity in Talipao was submitted to the battalion on a daily basis. Only a few months prior, the AFP had no sources in Talipao, but initial intelligence estimated that active members of ASG and JI passed through the municipality daily. Within the first month of the outhouse projects, AFP sources indicated that routine ASG and JI routes of movement were restricted to areas outside of the quickly expanding AFP influence in Talipao. After three months of AFP-village interaction, the ASG and JI were being denied access to Talipao and were forced to transit the rugged mountains of northern Jolo, which were heavily patrolled by AFP Marines. While reports of enemy activity in Talipao diminished, reports of enemy contact north of Talipao by the AFP Marines increased. The AFP's continued presence signaled the government's intentions to secure Talipao.

Conclusion

The outhouse was a simple tool that was appropriate for the jungle villages of Jolo where the insurgents thrived. The outhouse is not the answer to every insurgency, nor will it win the fight on Jolo by itself, but it demonstrates the theory that hearts and minds can be won with small projects and at a very minimal cost. Ironically, the reality of highly constrained resources encouraged ingenuity on the part of AFP/US personnel to develop a project which opened doors for continued military engagement. As the civil-military bonds strengthened, insurgent support diminished in a zero sum relationship – as the government got stronger, the insurgency got weaker. Identifying the needs of the population that could be satisfied by the AFP/US forces was the first critical step to destroying the links between the populace and the ASG and JI in Talipao. In the larger war on terror, thinking globally is important for policy makers, but acting locally will always be the greatest challenge for front line soldiers.

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ⁱ Miguel J. Hernandez, “Kris vs. Krag,” *Military History*, (June 2006), vol. 23, issue 4, p. 23.

ⁱⁱ Nation Master Website, www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Talipao%2C-Sulu (accessed on 5 January 2009).

ⁱⁱⁱ The Official Website of the Provincial Government of Sulu, www.sulu.gov.ph/briefprofile.asp?id=6&hide_id=5&tabid=1 (accessed on 5 January 2009).

^{iv} David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Security International, 2007), 4.

^v The Official Website of the Provincial Government of Sulu,

^{vi} Colonel Eric P. Wendt, “Strategic Counterinsurgency Modeling,” *Special Warfare*, (September 2005), p. 10.

^{vii} David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*

^{viii} Colonel Eric P. Wendt, “Strategic Counterinsurgency Modeling,”

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