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Research Report

Counterinsurgency Myths & Methods

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Introduction

In September 2005, US and Iraqi forces assaulted the Iraqi city of Tal Afar to re-establish security in a city that had become a central node of the insurgency. Led by COL HR McMaster in command of the 3rd Armored Division, the assault was preceded by months of planning, build-up, and "shaping operations" designed to evacuate civilians and produce favorable conditions for the allied forces. The plan was, by all accounts, successful; after weeks of hard urban combat, by December the city was clear of insurgents and coming back to life.

American forces' apparent success in Tal Afar became a bright spot for the Bush administration and the basis for touting a new counterinsurgency strategy of "clear hold build"—a precursor to the counterinsurgency doctrine that would be released in January 2007, and a strategy that has been increasingly depicted as a task that requires light infantry forces to engage in complex political tasks as they exercise significant levels of restraint in the employment of kinetic action.[1]

However, an analysis of the coverage around counterinsurgency operations suggests that the narrative around COIN changed over time to reflect a new consensus about the utility of population-centric tactics over traditional kinetic urban combat. Rather than present an accurate picture of how kinetic operations in Tal Afar led to a marked decline in violence and paved the way for other rebuilding activities, political and military leaders used the 3rd ACR's success to justify a new doctrine that looked radically different from what actually happened on the ground.

This report argues that this evolution in COIN narrative has resulted in four myths about counterinsurgency operations that: 1) overstate the ability of reconstruction and development efforts to reduce violence, 2) underestimate the importance of firepower and indirect fires in establishing security, 3) overreport the impact of collateral damage on long-term security outcomes, and 4) overemphasize the utility of tribal engagement efforts

[1] Fitzsimmons, Michael Fitzsimmons, "Governance, Identity, and Counterinsurgency: Evidence from Ramadi and Tal Afar" Monograph 532 (Carlisle, PA: Army War College Press, 2013); Bruce Pirnie and Edward O'Connell, "Counterinsurgency in Iraq (2003-2006)" (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008); George Packer, "The Lessons of Tal Afar," *New Yorker,* April 3, 2006, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/04/10/the-lesson-of-tal-afar; FM 3-24, The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual (US Army and Marine Corps, 2007).

before clearing operations. They are myths because they both misrepresent the actual events that took place in Tal Afar, and are insufficient conditions for success in counterinsurgency operations. Indeed, a closer look at operations in Tal Afar reveal that, far from the ability to win hearts and minds, it was the sustained application of coercive power that was necessary for success in north-western Iraq. Strategies that emphasized population-centric methods, while not without value in the long-term, were not violence-reducing themselves, and rather could only be successful once major kinetic operations had established baseline levels of security. This report is therefore not a critique of "clear hold build" as a strategy, but rather challenges many of the narratives that emerged during the subsequent counterinsurgency debates that de-emphasized the importance of the first two stages—both of which require much heavier application of combat power than the final conventional wisdom would suggest.

Methodology

To critically evaluate these four common counterinsurgency narratives, I dig deeper into the pacification of Tal Afar in 2005. Media, scholarly, and official sources alike claim that the success in Tal Afar was the result of ingenuity and innovation by then-Colonel HR McMaster and a group of motivated officers—soldiers who understood that counterinsurgency is about winning the population and not just eliminating insurgents.[2] Critically, operations in Tal Afar became a blueprint that inspired political and military leaders alike to embrace a new population-centric counterinsurgency strategy—articulated initially by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in October 2005 testimony to Congress, and then codified in doctrine that would ultimately be unveiled a year later.[3] Tal Afar is

[2] Packer, *The Lessons of Tal Afar*; Mackubin Thomas Owens, "Counterinsurgency from the Bottom Up: Colonel H.R. McMaster and the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment in Tel Afar, Spring–Fall 2005," *Foreign Policy Research Institute E-notes*, March 17, 2017, https://www.fpri.org/article/2017/03/counterinsurgency-bottom-colonel-h-r-mcmaster-3rd-armored-cavalry-regiment-tel-afar-spring-fall-2005/#:~:text=However%2C%20McMaster%20was%20asked%20to,turnaround%20in%20al%20Anbar%20Province; Robert Chamberlain, "Finding the Flow: Shadow Economies, Ethnic Networks, and Counterinsurgency," *Military Review* (Sept–Oct 2008), 106–109.

[3] Condoleezza Rice, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, "Iraq in U.S. Foreign Policy," Committee Hearing, 19 October 2005. Available online at https://www.foreign.senate.gov/hearings/iraq-in-

therefore what one might call a critical case for modern counterinsurgency theory, given its prominence in the COIN debate. Theoretically, further investigation into the case should reveal a textbook—or at least plausible—supporting case for population-based counterinsurgency theory. Methodologically, therefore, undermining this important case casts doubt on the foundations of counterinsurgency theory, and should cause us to re-think its validity across time and space.

This report therefore identifies important scope conditions on popular counterinsurgency theory and doctrine that have been previously under-appreciated. Far from being sufficient to reduce violence, population-centric counterinsurgency tactics such as reconstruction spending, dismounted patrols, courageous restraint, and tribal engagement are only useful when first preceded by large-scale clearing operations that utilize large-scale conventional capabilities.[4]

Overall, The Tal Afar case shows that even in the model case of counterinsurgency, the causal mechanism behind violence reduction remains the ability to protect and sustain coercive power over time and space. While operations in Tal Afar successfully used reconstruction funds, tribal councils, and police recruiting during their time in Tal Afar, they were only able to do so after a lengthy armed reconnaissance, a major urban clearing operation, and the establishment of 26 combat patrol bases inside the city itself. Far from being a textbook model of COIN doctrine, the pacification of Tal Afar is best described as

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us-foreign-policy; Office of the Press Secretary, "Fact Sheet: Strategy for Victory: Clear, Hold, and Build," The White House, March 20, 2006, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2006/03/20060320-6.html#:~:text=The%20Iraqi%20government%20pledged%20%2450,the%20sewer%20and%20water%20systems.&text=The%20Story%20Of%20Tal%20Afar,Iraqis%20Can%20Live%20Together%20Peacefully.; U.S. Army Field Manual 3-24: *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgency*, US Army (May 2014).

[4] Many involved in the creation of modern counterinsurgency doctrine argue that it was never intended to remove the role of large-scale combat operations from the military strategy in either Iraq or Afghanistan. Yet this claim understates the dramatic change in emphasis and strategy that occurred in 2006. While heavy operations were not banned, military leaders instead emphasized the importance and preference for small-scale unit-level operations that privileged light-foot infantry. As this report and footnotes show, thinking about military strategy in Iraq shifted considerably toward seeing reconstruction and tribal engagement strategies as central to success, with little to no attention paid to the importance of coercive capacity.

the success of American power projection, use of coercive force, and the de facto segregation of the Sunni-Shia population in the city.

Tal Afar: An Overview[5]

The security situation in Tal Afar was highly unstable when the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR) arrived in March of 2005. Assuming the northern areas would be less violent, leaders at Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I) had allocated just a single under-manned battalion to cover Western Ninewa Province—an almost 10,000 square mile area that included the two critical border towns of Sinjar and Tal Afar. Outmanned and rendered combat ineffective from heavy attrition, the outgoing light cavalry company responsible for Tal Afar had lost control of the city and could no longer enter without suffering unacceptable losses.[6] Unable to enter the city without taking fire, then-Colonel HR McMaster and Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Hickey acknowledged that the 3d ACR would be forced to "fight for information," and preparations began for an armed reconnaissance throughout the city.[7] With armored vehicles capable of weathering small arms fire and IEDs, soldiers in the city consistently took fire and engaged insurgent forces inside the city to develop a better picture of insurgent behavior, strongholds, and networks.[8] With human intelligence through Shia networks unreliable, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) operations from mechanical sources gave a similarly incomplete picture. As a result, the 3d ACR spent much of the summer of 2005 conducting armed reconnaissance through the streets using tank patrols and engaging enemy contact. By the end of July, they began to conduct "shaping operations" meant to drive insurgents into two specific neighborhoods in preparation for a large-scale assault.[9] Throughout the month of August, preparations for an all-out assault on insurgent strongholds inside the city of Tal Afar were well underway. Units began to build an eight-foot berm (earthen barrier) that spanned 12 miles around the city, advertising its presence and purpose to the population

[5] For a summary of events, see Table 1: Timeline of Operations in Tal Afar.
[6] *After Action Report: Operation Restoring Rights*, 3rd Armored Cavalry Division (2005).
[7] Phone Interview with LTG HR McMaster, May 19, 2016.
[8] Phone Interview with MAJ Gavin Schwan, April 29, 2016.
[9] Phone Interview with COL Michael Simmering, April 29, 2016.

writ large, and by the end of the month, the 3d ACR has amassed "nearly a division's worth of firepower" and 8,000 soldiers to flood the city.[10]

Code-named Operation Restoring Rights, the major offensive began the night of 2 September with an intense bombing campaign designed to decapitate the insurgent organization in Tal Afar. Forty bombing raids overnight targeted leadership headquarters and other critical nodes of the city's insurgent network, destroying many of the major roads and critical infrastructure as well.[11] After three days of combat operations in the city that killed over 150 insurgents and resulted in the detention of over 600 suspects, the 3d ACR and accompanying elements prepared for the thrust of the assault into the insurgent stronghold of Sarai, which was preceded by a mandatory evacuation period that lasted a full week. Joined by an infantry company from the 82nd Airborne to conduct house-to-house searches in streets that were too narrow to fit a tank, Coalition forces discovered that many of the insurgents had fled, and those who did remain were poorly trained and badly organized.[12] As a result, the battle of Tal Afar concluded on 18 September 2005 at a cost of six US soldiers killed in action—a much lower casualty total than the leadership had expected prior to the operation.[13]

Rather than retreat to their base outside the city, the 3d ACR instead established 26 combat outposts inside the city and continued to conduct combat patrols, though these were scaled down from squadron-level operations to the platoon and squad level, reflecting the relatively low level of resistance they faced in the aftermath of Restoring Rights. Reconstruction efforts began in mid to late October in preparation for the

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[10] Ricardo Herrera, "Brave Rifles at Tall 'Afar, September 2005," in *In Contact! Case Studies from the Long War, Volume 1*, William Robertson, ed. (Ft. Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2006), pp 125–151; Jay Baker, "Tal Afar 2005: Laying the Counterinsurgency Groundwork," *Army Magazine* (June 2009), pp 61–68.
[11] *After Action Report.*
[12] Interview with MAJ Brian Tinklepaugh, April 13, 2016.
[13] Interview with LTC Alan Blackburn, April 29, 2016.

TABLE 1: Timeline of Operations in Tal Afar

March 2005	3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment Arrives in Kuwait
April 2005	3rd ACR arrives in Ninewa Province
1 May 2005	3rd ACR assumes full responsibility for Tal Afar
May 2005	Sabre Squadron begins reinforcing major supply routes with patrol bases
June 2005	3rd ACR conducts squadron-level operations to gather intelligence
1 July–31 Aug 2005	3rd ACR conducts Operation Sabre Unleashed (shaping operations) to set conditions for Operation Restoring Rights
Aug 2005	Berm surrounding Tal Afar constructed
Aug–Sept 2005	Contracts awarded for reconstruction projects to begin after Restoring Rights
2 Sept 2005	Operation Restoring Rights begins
18 Sept 2005	Operations Restoring Rights ends
Sept–Oct 2005	3rd ACR establishes combat outposts in Tal Afar
Oct 2005	Reconstruction begins, including payments for damaged property
15 Oct 2005	Iraqi Constitutional Referendum
Nov 2005	Police recruiting begins in earnest
15 Dec 2005	Iraqi National Elections
19 Feb 2006	3rd ACR transfers authority to 1st Brigade Combat Team, 1st ACR.

constitutional referendum that month, and the Iraqi government agreed to pay 150,000 dinars to each family that had suffered property damage from the two week campaign; they would ultimately disperse over 4.5 billion dinars. Recruiting drives that were held to attract Sunni policemen were generally successful, and intelligence from human sources became more reliable and widely available. Violence in the city declined substantially, and commercial activity soon recovered, as did the city's education system, infrastructure, and civic life.[14]

Myths of Counterinsurgency

The success of the 3rd ACR in reducing violence and preventing the re-infiltration of insurgent forces into the city became a model for counterinsurgency operations in the new Army Field Manual 3-24. It was widely heralded by public officials, including President Bush, as the "right" way to employ counterinsurgency methods and the phrase "clear hold build" became essential strategy for the final three years of combat operations.[15] As observers sought to identify the things that the 3rd ACR did differently in order to achieve those results, however, it led to the rise of a series of myths about counterinsurgency that de-emphasized the importance of kinetic action while overstating the role of post-clearing methods in reducing violence. The following subsections review these myths, the reality behind them, and then evaluate them in the context of the Battle of Tal Afar to show that the reduction of violence was only possible with significant numbers of U.S. forces consistently projecting coercive power in order to establish security. It is clear that rather than being violence-reducing themselves, the more population-centric methods that were later heralded as the primary element of successful counterinsurgency were only helpful in re-establishing commercial and political activity *only after violence had declined due to kinetic actions.* Put another way, while the methods outlined below eventually became seen

[14] Packer, *The Lessons of Tal Afar.*
[15] Senate Foreign Relations Committee, "Iraq in U.S. Foreign Policy"; George W. Bush, "Remarks to the City Club in Cleveland, Ohio," September 21, 2004, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-city-club-cleveland-ohio.

as necessary for violence reduction, a closer examination of the motivating case reveals that they were neither necessary nor sufficient for violence levels to decline.

Myth #1: Money as a Weapons System

The introduction of reconstruction funding, and the Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) in particular, led to a new way of thinking inside and outside of the military about how to conduct counterinsurgency operations. Inspired by the grievance-based literature, the idea that targeted reconstruction funding could decrease a population's support for an insurgency became a powerful narrative that resulted in an enormous emphasis on using money to reduce violence. One can trace the evolution of the myth in the aftermath of the Tal Afar operation: once clearing operations had ceased, the emphasis turned toward rebuilding the city. As funds were slow to trickle in, success in Tal Afar then became synonymous with disbursing reconstruction money. [16]

Eventually, many people began suggesting that it may be substitutable for combat power. General Petraeus, the commander of U.S. forces in Iraq from 2007 to 2008, reported after his second tour that "money can be more important than real ammunition."[17] This led to the April 2009 DOD handbook, "Money as a Weapons System," which explicitly outlines ways to use reconstruction money with the understanding that it will aid counterinsurgency efforts.[18] The introduction begins with the following motivation: "Warfighters at brigade, battalion, and company level in a counterinsurgency (COIN) environment employ money as a weapons system to *win the hearts and minds* of the indigenous population to facilitate defeating the insurgents. Money is *one of the primary weapons* used by war-fighters to achieve successful mission results in COIN..." (emphasis added). It includes an even more dramatic quote from Petraeus while he was in command

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[16] Phillip Shishkin, "Many Hindrances Beset Iraq's Road to Recover," *The Wall Street Journal*, Oct 31, 2005, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB113071461577783740?reflink=desktopwebshare_permalink; Josh White, "Tall Afar's Long Road Back," NBC News (Nov 11, 2006), https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna15663415; Packer, *The Lessons of Tal Afar.*

[17] David Petraeus, "Learning Counterinsurgency: Observations from Soldiering in Iraq," *Military Review* (January–February 2006), pp 2–12.

[18] U.S. Army, *Commander's Guide to Money as a Weapons System: Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures* (Ft. Leavenworth, KS: Center for Army Lessons Learned, 2009).

of Multi-National Forces – Iraq: "Money is my most important ammunition in this war." By the end of the Iraq War, the amount of reconstruction money spent had become a critical metric in how the DOD evaluated the success of a deployed unit. Peter Van Buren, a State Department official who served in Iraq from 2009 to 2010, reported that the Army would share its funds with the resource-poor Provincial Reconstruction Teams, "because individual military units were graded on how much cash they spent—more money spent meant more reconstruction kudos on evaluation reports."[19]

The reality of reconstruction funding across the war, however, was that it was largely a wasteful effort that had little short-term impact on communities and even less long-term influence on hearts and minds.[20] The fiscal spending cycle controlled by Congress resulted in bureaucratic inefficiencies that adversely affected the effectiveness of the projects funded, and changing political priorities and changes in leadership resulted in large percentage of projects left unfinished or unable to be maintained while many were never started at all.[21] Projects quickly became targets for insurgent activity unless properly protected and guarded by security forces—in practice, this meant U.S. troops. Corrupt practices by local elites meant that just a fraction of the money allocated actually went toward the project, and in many cases funded insurgent sympathizers. The Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR) issued a comprehensive report that was highly critical of the program's effectiveness, and concluded that forces should, "begin rebuilding only after establishing sufficient security, and focus first on small programs and projects."[22] This is not to say that every project was wasteful, or than no good came from reconstruction funds, but rather that there is very little evidence to suggest that

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[19] Peter Van Buren, *We Meant Well: How I Helped Lose the Battle for the Hearts and Minds of the Iraqi People* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2012).
[20] House Foreign Affairs Committee, "Learning from Iraq: A Final Report from the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction," Hearing Before the Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, 9 July 2013. Available online at: https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-113hhrg81868/pdf/CHRG-113hhrg81868.pdf.
[21] Carrie Lee and John Kendall, "Use it or Lose It: The Political Economy of Counterinsurgency Strategy," *Armed Forces and Society* 45:3 (2019), pp 399-425; Van Buren, *We Meant Well*.
[22] House Foreign Affairs Committee, "Learning from Iraq: A Final Report from the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction."

reconstruction funding played a significant or reliable role in either reducing violence or achieving stability over the course of the war as a whole.

The reconstruction effort in Tal Afar reveals the importance of establishing security through kinetic operations before spending CERP money, and the kinds of projects that *can* have a positive effect on a city's economy and population, even if it is not itself violence reducing. The evidence and data show that reconstruction money was used very little in the lead-up to Operation Restoring Rights, while the area was flooded with funds after the first phase of the operation. According to an internal tracking system (since removed from public access), in the hundred days before Restoring Rights, a total of just four projects were funded, of which only one (supplies for a boy's prep school) was completed before the assault.[23] By contrast, the one hundred days *after* Restoring Rights saw twenty-one new reconstruction projects started at a cost of over $6.2 million, most of which focused on infrastructure repairs to roads, buildings, water lines, and the electrical grid.[24] McMaster had planned out ahead of the operation which projects would be prioritized and had approved the use of reconstruction funded prior to the initiation of Restoring Rights.[25] Rather than being used to strategically influence the hearts and minds of the local population (and therefore reduce violence), reconstruction in Tal Afar was primarily used to repair and replace damaged roads and buildings from the assault, after violence had already declined.[26]

Myth #2: Dismounted Patrols are Most Effective at COIN

A second narrative popular within discussions of counterinsurgency asserts that dismounted infantry operations are the most effective means of reducing violence levels and fighting insurgents. The ability of the light infantryman to go house to house, see and

[23] Data from the Iraq Reconstruction Management System (accessed August 2010).
[24] Data from the Iraq Reconstruction Management System (accessed August 2010).
[25] Phone Interview with LTG HR McMaster.
[26] The most prominent studies on reconstruction and violence levels evaluate correlations over the same six-month time period. Because of the short time-span between kinetic forces reducing violence and then flooding the area with reconstruction funds, it is possible that these studies in fact suffer from reverse causation—this analysis suggests that rather than reconstruction money causing a reduction in violence, it is in fact the reduction in violence that enables reconstruction spending.

interact with the population, and use small arms to limit collateral damage from engagements is seen as a large advantage in counterinsurgency operations. In theory, these actions result in an increase in trust amongst the population, more (and more accurate) human intelligence, and a more culturally-aware counterinsurgency force.[27] The Army Field Manual on Counterinsurgency, FM 3-24, lists dismounted infantry as the number one essential capability for conducting a COIN operation.[28] Academic work has come to largely similar conclusions about the utility of dismounted patrols and light infantry in COIN settings: New tactics informed by the writings of David Galula, Robert Thompson, John Nagl, and David Kilcullen, introduced in U.S. Army Field Manual 3-24, emphasize the importance of dismounted patrols in order to connect with the local population, gather information, develop confidence in government capacity and separate the insurgents from the population through combat.[29] Some studies found that the use of mechanized forces, which are more destructive by nature, results in worse security outcomes during counterinsurgency operations.[30]

In an operational environment, however, dismounted infantry operations are much riskier with far less effect in contested areas than armored units utilizing a range of direct and indirect fires. The evidence shows that dismounted light patrols are only truly effective in engaging the population once violence levels have declined to the point where soldiers are safe to walk in the streets. Additionally, force employment, not mechanization, may instead be responsible for variation in combat operations in Iraq.[31] Urban combat

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[27] U.S. Army Field Manual 3-24: *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgency*, US Army (May 2014); Eli Berman, Joseph Felter, and Jacob Shapiro, *Small Wars, Big Data: The Information Revolution in Modern Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
[28] US Army FM 3-24.
[29] David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Praeger Books, 1964); Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam* (New York: Praeger Books, 1966); John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Kilcullen, *Accidental Guerilla*.
[30] Jason Lyall and Isiah Wilson III, "Rage Against the Machines: Explaining Outcomes in Counterinsurgency Wars," *International Organization* 63:1 (2009), pp. 67–106; Joseph Felter, "Taking Guns to a Knife Fight: A Case for Empirical Study of Counterinsurgency," PhD dissertation, Stanford University Dissertation, 2005.
[31] Raphael Moyer, "Death Before Dismount? Mechanization, Force Employment, and Counterinsurgency Outcomes in Iraq," Master's Thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology,

advantages insurgent defenders hiding in buildings and blending in with civilians on the streets. Dismounted soldiers, out in the open without heavy vehicles to protect them from small arms fire and explosives, become target practice for insurgents seeking to demonstrate their control over the city. By contrast, the protective environment and discriminate nature of firepower from reinforced fighting vehicles allow soldiers to continue gathering intelligence in a contested environment by following through an engagement with considerably less risk to soldiers.[32] Without armored units providing protection and indirect fires, infantry units are less effective, less efficient, and far more likely to suffer high levels of casualties.[33] Only after the relative risk to unprotected infantry soldiers has declined can dismounted patrols be an independently effective method in counterinsurgency.

The counterinsurgency campaign in Tal Afar highlights the importance of armored vehicles, indirect fires, and other "heavy" units in gathering intelligence and executing effective counterinsurgency operations in a contested environment. Once the 3d ACR arrived in theater, McMaster was adamant that the unit be supported by the Regiment's full armored capabilities.[34] In contrast to traditional infantry units that are typically equipped with much lighter vehicles, the deployment of an armored cavalry regiment represented a considerable shift toward additional firepower and destructive potential.[35] "...[E]ach mission was a mix of dismounted and mounted elements with tanks, Bradleys, and aviation providing overwatch." The use of tanks and indirect fires during Restoring Rights successfully decapitated the insurgent organization in Tal Afar, leading to a disorganized and relatively weak resistance when U.S. and Iraqi troops entered the following morning. After the execution of a major bombing raid, assault, and subsequent civilian evacuation,

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2011; Ryan C. Van Wie and Jacob Walden, "Troops or Tanks? Rethinking COIN mechanization and force employment," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 33:6 (2022), pp. 1032–1058.

[32] Chris McKinney, Mark Elfendahl, and H.R. McMaster, "Why the U.S. Army Needs Armor: The Case for a More Balanced Force," *Foreign Affairs* 92:3 (2013), pp. 129–136.

[33] Gian Gentile, David Johnson, Lisa Saum-Manning, Raphael Cohen, Shara Williams, Carrie Lee, Michael Shurkin, Brenna Allen, Sarah Lovell, and James Doty III, *Reimagining the Character of Urban Operations for the U.S. Army: How the Past Can Inform the Present and Future* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017).

[34] Phone Interview with LTG McMaster

[35] Herrera, "Brave Rifles at Tall 'Afar."

Coalition forces were unable to locate any insurgents in Sarai and "not a hostile shot" was fired as the insurgents even had time to clear their dead from the city.[36] The battle of Tal Afar concluded on 18 September 2005 at a cost of six US soldiers killed in action, the low body count largely a function of the effectiveness of artillery and air support during the operation. One officer remarked that the presence of close air support, indirect fires, and use of armored vehicles saved perhaps 50 lives. Only once heavy combat operations had concluded that the 3rd ACR was able to establish 26 outposts within the city and stayed to consolidate their hard-won gains through a mix of mounted and dismounted patrols.[37]

Myth #3: Civilian Casualties Prevent Counterinsurgency Success

The concern over armored, heavy weapons in counterinsurgency operations is closely linked with concern over collateral damage and the sentiment that each innocent person killed creates more insurgents and results in worse security outcomes. Based again on the grievance literature and studies on civilian casualties, concern over collateral damage and civilian casualties gained prominence in the popular press, academic literature, and eventually influenced U.S. rules of engagement and combat operations in Afghanistan.[38] Kilcullen argued that counterinsurgents must focus on, "putting the well-being of noncombatant civilians ahead of any other consideration, even – in fact, especially – ahead of killing the enemy."[39] This new consensus significantly influenced strategic thinking during the war in Afghanistan: During the time that Gen Stanley McChrystal commanded NATO forces in Afghanistan, he significantly tightened the rules of engagement during combat, and considered adding a medal for a soldier's "courageous restraint" when she or he withheld fire in order to save civilian lives.[40] Today, many people continue to argue in

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[36] Michael Ware, "Chasing Ghosts," Time Magazine, September 26, 2005, https://www.mickware.info/Info/Reports/2005_files/084c858d48a84cebdbd92ba8a21af327-10.php.
[37] Interview with LTC Blackburn.
[38] Luke Condra and Jacob Shapiro, "Who Takes the Blame? The Strategic Effects of Collateral Damage," *American Journal of Political Science* 56:1 (2012), pp 167–187.
[39] David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
[40] Sebastain Abbot, "A medal for 'courageous restraint'? NATO seeks to avoid killing Afghan noncombatants," Associated Press, May 4, 2010, https://www.cleveland.com/world/2010/05/a_medal_for_courageous_restrai.html.

favor of severely restricting the rules of engagement and rewarding soldiers for withholding fire.[41]

While inflicting civilian casualties and collateral damage is not (and should not be) a part of official U.S. policy, tightening the rules of engagement to prioritize civilians over friendly forces exposes U.S. soldiers to dramatically more risk in exchange for diminishing returns.[42] In many cases, the use of tanks and air power, while at times indiscriminate during major combat operations, ultimately reduces friendly casualties and allows for additional intelligence gathering.[43] The academic literature on indiscriminate fire and violence are similarly mixed on the benefits of restricting the rules of engagement; While some find that random increases in bombing led to higher levels of insurgent violence, others found that indiscriminate fire in fact reduced violence in certain conflicts.[44] As a result, the relationship between civilian casualties and battlefield effectiveness is far less straightforward than popular presentation would suggest.

In Tal Afar, the complex relationship between collateral damage and battlefield success was highlighted in the operational plan to assault the city. The U.S. military already has strict rules of engagement and protocols for assessing and limiting collateral damage during urban operations, and the 3rd ACR in Tal Afar followed these protocols successfully without added restrictions.[45] The 3rd ACR made extensive use of armored vehicles, close air support, and indirect fires throughout their deployment, both in the lead-up to Operation Restoring Rights and during the operation. Upon the discovery of weapons and

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[41] Joseph Felter and Jacob Shapiro, "Limiting Civilian Casualties as Part of a Winning Strategy: The Case of Courageous Restraint," *Daedalus* 146:1 (2017), 44–58.

[42] Jacqueline Hazelton argues that governments in fact benefit from the use of violence against civilians (see "The 'Hearts and minds' fallacy: Violence, coercion, and success in counterinsurgency warfare," *International Security* 41:1 (2017), pp. 80–113). While this may have been true in the historical counterinsurgency cases she examines, where news of civilian casualties and brutal treatment of civilians was not global news, today's media environment should lead us to question whether this is still the case.

[43] Gentile et al., "Reimagining the Character of Urban Operations."

[44] Melissa Dell and Pablo Querubin, "Nation Building Through Foreign Intervention: Evidence from Discontinuities in Military Strategies," NBER Working Paper, 2017. Available online at https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/dell/files/paper_combined.pdf; Jason Lyall, "Does Indiscriminate Violence Incite Insurgent Attacks? Evidence from Chechnya," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53:3 (2009), pp. 331–362.

[45] *U.S. Army Field Manual 3-06: Urban Operations* (2006). Headquarters, Department of the Army.

insurgents in the adjacent forest in August, 2d Squadron declared the woods a "free fire" zone—an area where they explicitly rejected restricted rules of engagement about enemy fire and instead reserved the right to shoot people in the forest on sight.[46] By the beginning of Operation Restoring Rights, the squadron had already executed 1500 reconnaissance patrols (many of which utilized "reconnaissance by fire" techniques), 111 cordon and searches, and 46 raids, destroyed over 900 enemy weapons, captured over 200 suspected insurgents, and killed over 130 people.[47] Still, in the days immediately before the beginning of Operation Restoring Rights, warnings were sent across the city encouraging civilians to evacuate before combat operations began.

In practice, however, the evacuation of Tal Afar was far from comprehensive. The assault resulted in substantial numbers of civilian casualties and collateral damage to the city's infrastructure and population. Civilians who chose to stay in the city were supposed to be evacuated by U.S. forces the first day of the assault, but challenges associated with the route (where Shia residents were expected to travel through heavily Sunni militant neighborhoods) led to major delays in the operation.[48] Further, 40 air strikes initiated without warning the night before (which successfully decapitated the insurgent leadership in Tal Afar) led to major blockages on the main road where civilians were expected to travel, in addition to dozens of civilian casualties from the blasts. Recalled one front-line officer who asked to remain anonymous on the impact of the strikes, "There were a lot of bodies... not all of them were bad people." Overall, while the 3rd ACR used methods that resulted in a short-term increase in civilian casualties, ultimately the better intelligence picture and lack of insurgent leadership during the battle itself spared both U.S. soldiers and countless Iraqi civilians from the dangers of a long, protracted urban battle.

Myth #4: Tribal Engagement Wins Local Support

A final myth that has gained significant ground in the debate around counterinsurgency methods asserts that tribal (or local) engagement, cultural awareness,

[46] Herrera, "Brave Rifles at Tall 'Afar."
[47] Ibid.
[48] Interview with MAJ Tinklepaugh.

and local security forces are the best way to develop local support and vital human intelligence sources. When applied to the Iraq case, this literature largely suggests two explanations for why violence declined: U.S. forces were able to partner with Iraqi leaders who had independently decided to work against al-Qaeda, and ethnic/sectarian homogenization by neighborhood removed security threats between groups.[49] Proponents suggest that if U.S. forces show respect for cultural sensitivities, local leaders, and build up indigenous security forces, they will develop goodwill amongst the population and be consistently rewarded with better intelligence about the population and insurgent activities.[50] As a result, military leaders used tribal engagement strategies as integral parts of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Praised by top leaders such as General David Petraeus, General Stanley McChrystal, and Admiral Michael Mullen, the Army had Greg Mortenson, author of the famous memoir *Three Cups of Tea,* lecture soldiers at over two dozen posts a year in Afghanistan.[51] At its height of popularity in late 2009, tribal engagement was variously described as the "blueprint for success" in Afghanistan, "the fastest growing critical mission set in conflicts now," "the most important aspect of the COIN effort in Afghanistan," and "our only hope."[52]

On the battlefield, however, tribal engagement without the ability to provide security guarantees was often counterproductive. Tribal leaders ultimately have their own agendas

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[49] Austin Long, "The Anbar Awakening," *Survival* 50:2 (2008), pp. 67–94; Daniel Green, "The Fallujah Awakening: A Case Study in Counterinsurgency," *Small War and Insurgencies* 21:4 (2010), pp 591–609; John Hagan, Joshua Kaiser, Anna Hanson, Jon Lindsay, Austin Long, Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey Frieman, and Jacob Shapiro, "Assessing the Synergy Thesis in Iraq," *International Security* 37:4 (2013), pp. 173–198; Nils Weidmann and Idean Salehyan, "Violence and Ethnic Segregation: A Computational Model Applied to Baghdad," *International Studies Quarterly* 57:1 (2013), pp. 52–64.
[50] Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin, *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace – One School at a Time* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007).
[51] Ibid.
[52] Patrick Gaydon and Jonathan Pan, "Three Cups of Tea and an IED: The Death of Haji Abdul Jabar and the Future of the Alikozai Tribe," *Small Wars Journal* (2010). Available online at https://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/462-gaydon.pdf; Jim Gant, *One Tribe at a Time: The Paper that Changed the War in Afghanistan* (Black Irish Entertainment LLC, 2014); Patrick James Christian, *A Combat Advisor's Guide to Tribal Engagement: History, Law, and War as Operational Elements* (Universal Publishers, 2011); Darin Blatt, Eric Long, Brain Mulhern, and Michael Ploskunak, "Tribal Engagement in Afghanistan," January 31, 2009, http://milnewstbay.pbworks.com/f/TribalEngagement-swmag-31Jan09.pdf; Kevin Drum, "A Tribal Strategy for Afghanistan," *Mother Jones*, 24 November 24, 2009, https://www.motherjones.com/kevin-drum/2009/11/tribal-strategy-afghanistan/.

and priorities, of which remaining alive and in power take precedence. Remarked one USAID official, "No amount of tea with Afghans will persuade them that we are like them, that our war is their war or that our interests are their interests."[53] Clan members who are unable to guarantee the safety of their families from insurgent retaliation will be inclined to either mislead counterinsurgent forces or avoid contact altogether.[54] More problematically, tribal engagement can at times be counterproductive as unverified reports may consist either of attempts at score settling or false information designed to decrease the legitimacy of counterinsurgency forces.[55] Many critical assessments discussed strategies of pure tribal engagement being employed only when security-first operations using large kinetic actions were unavailable due to small force sizes.[56] While pro-government sympathizers may exist within the population, unless counterinsurgents are able to *ex ante* demonstrate the ability to both effectively act on accurate information and prevent retaliatory activities, sympathizers will refrain from collaborating with government agents. Remarked the same AID official, "The war in Afghanistan isn't about persuasion or tea. It's about power."[57]

The experience of the 3rd ACR in Tal Afar suggests that tribal engagement is only an effective strategy once local groups have a credible belief that counterinsurgent forces can 1) differentiate between good and bad intelligence, 2) effectively act on the intelligence received, and 3) prevent retribution attacks on informants from insurgent forces. Initial efforts to engage Shia tribal leaders often resulted in bad information, while Sunni leaders were completely uncooperative.[58] Score-settling by Shia groups was common, and U.S. forces would at times arrive at a target only to realize that their Shia informants were arguing about which rival they wanted to eliminate.[59] Further, because American forces were seen as tools of the Shia militias, Sunni groups were completely unwilling to cooperate. After the completion of Operation Restoring Rights, however, tribal engagement

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[53] Greg Jaffe, "How the U.S. military fell in love with 'Three Cups of Tea'," *Washington Post*, April 21, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/how-the-us-military-fell-in-love-with-three-cups-of-tea/2011/04/20/AFWqYaJE_story.html.
[54] Long, "The Anbar Awakening."
[55] Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
[56] Blatt et al., "Tribal Engagement in Afghanistan."
[57] Jaffe, "How the U.S. military fell in love with 'Three Cups of Tea.'"
[58] Interview with LTC James Dayhoff, April 28, 2016.
[59] Interview with MAJ Tinklepaugh.

became a much more efficient and effective strategy. Without exception, every soldier that I interviewed from the 3rd ACR described a dramatic difference in the quality and quantity of information available from tribal leaders and human intelligence sources—both Sunni and Shia—before and after the clearing operation. With the most extreme elements of the insurgency eliminated from the city and U.S. forces stationed inside the city at over 26 different combat outposts, pro-government forces were finally able to credibly commit to securing the safety of citizens (particularly Sunnis) who acted as human intelligence sources.[60] Recruiting for the local police forces increased dramatically, and the intelligence picture, which just a few months ago had been largely comprised of signals intelligence and reconnaissance-by-fire, improved dramatically with the help of local knowledge and community engagement. However, the watershed moment was not a meeting with the right tribal sheikh where cultural differences were bridged and understood, but rather the explosion of kinetic operations that cleared a city of insurgents and allowed U.S. forces to consistently project power inside of Tal Afar.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Although the U.S. is pivoting toward strategic competition and contemplating great power war for the first time in 30 years, neither counterinsurgency nor urban warfare is likely to recede in relevance over the coming decades. It is therefore critical that policy-makers and military strategists learn the right lessons from two decades of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Especially important is parsing the narrative of counterinsurgency from the reality on the ground; lessons learned must be based in objective analysis of what tactics, operations, and strategies were employed and effective to be useful after the war.

In this report, I identify four myths about counterinsurgency campaigns that have gained traction in the academic and policy discussion around counterinsurgency methods: money as a weapons system, dismounted patrols, courageous restraint, and tribal engagement. Using a textbook case for counterinsurgency—the battle that Army doctrine FM 3-24 specifically cites as a model operation of COIN operations—I systematically

[60] Interview with LTC Dayhoff.

review the role that each theory played in the successful counterinsurgency campaign waged by the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment in Tal Afar over the summer of 2005. I found that only once violence had already been reduced by large-scale kinetic operations sustained over the course of five months, which culminated in a major clearing operation that lasted two weeks and saw 8,000 troops assault the city, were any of these methods successful in improving the lives of the population and/or maintaining the security that had already been established.

The evidence supplied in this report point to a complex picture of counterinsurgency operations, but also asserts the primacy of the counterinsurgent's ability to project power and use coercive force to reduce violence. The Tal Afar case study does not claim that the strategies above are necessarily counterproductive or without value, but instead suggests that they are only truly effective when employed after kinetic action has reduced violence to sufficiently safe levels for non-kinetic activities. Essentially, the evidence suggests that security must already be a public good before governance models of counterinsurgency may be employed effectively. While critics may argue that the two models can be used simultaneously or in substitution, the case study does not bear this out. Instead, we observe that only after a summer of kinetic action against insurgent forces and a major clearing operation were any of the population-centric tactics effective in Tal Afar. "Clear, hold, build," as it turns out, are meant to be accomplished in sequence—and the success of the clear and hold stages may in fact require much heavier military power than previously appreciated.

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 and subsequent collapse of Kabul, ongoing operations in Syria and Iraq, and other intra-state conflicts in Yemen, Libya, Burma, and others demand an investigation of counterinsurgency strategy and its variations. This investigation suggests that efforts on political reconciliation and other population-centric methods may be largely wasted while parts of the state are controlled by non-government forces and more still are contested. This effort further requires a commitment by a government or occupying force to conduct combat operations for long periods of time until they can develop the capacity to protect against both internal and external threats—a process that can take decades. The U.S. experience in Iraq will

undoubtedly influence discussions and debates on conflict, doctrine, and the lessons we take from these wars may be among the most important in decades.

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