

Tao, Clausewitz and Counterinsurgency

Taoism might be defined as the basic, eternal principle of the universe that transcends reality and is the source of being, non-being, and change[1]. Clausewitz is, and has, formed the bedrock of our being. Similarly the US military has developed and evolved its being over the course of time with definite points in its history in which change was widely recognized as necessary; for instance the historical debacle of Task Force Smith during the Korean War, an vignette that serves to illustrate the significance of failure in preparedness. Vietnam became a catalyst for change and being; significantly with the development of the concept of air fighting units, the innovation of the Air Assault Division, and probably most importantly, the seed of the essence of our being; *if units could accomplish other tasks with smaller forces in shorter campaigns*[2]. 1973 was also a significant year for the military for the lessons learned from the Oct War became incorporated into our being with the publication of the 1976 version of FM 100-5; a manual that not only attempted to change organization but the way the entire US Army would think[3]. Since this time, our being has been validated and vindicated as clearly evident in the prosecution of the War of “91”, and to many, the rapidity in which Baghdad Fell in May of 2003.[4]

Our doctrine, based on a continuing evolution of the theory of *On War*, provides the intellectual underpinnings, the very being of the organization.

To some the recent COMISAF assessment is a felony indictment and to others it is a long awaited confession. It is bold, daring, and demands a renewed emphasis on the basics and a dramatic change in how we operate.[5]. To succeed we require *a new approach with a significant magnitude of change* [6]. Two specific focus areas for change are changing the operational culture and improve the unity of effort and command[7]. An important point in the assessment related to changing operational culture states that *while the insurgency can afford to lose fighters and leaders, it cannot afford to lose control of the population*[8]. These bold and good intentions are easy to state but not so easy to implement.[9]

When exactly did we discover, or will we discover, that the cultural characteristics of the way we wage war are not easily overturned?[10]

This idea of transformation, literally under fire in the midst of conflict, has exciting implications for its potential success and equally exciting potential for failure. Are we sure that we understand that this new American way of war is more than how we use and apply certain principles or tools, that it is more than simple degrees of separation in terminology ?

Clausewitz, warned of similar dangers while speaking to focusing exclusively on enemy destruction when he said that *the danger of this method is that the greater the success we seek the greater will be the damage if we fail*[11]. Are we encouraging or have we established expectations that are now undeliverable? “For too long we have planned to wage wars quickly, to assume the offensive, to exploit technology, to fight wars in a big way and to use its armed forces to achieve military objectives”[12].

The eternal principles of war as promulgated by Clausewitz, has formed the bedrock of our doctrine and “being”. One merely needs to look at the principles of war as prescribed in current doctrine. And if we follow this line of thought does our intuition seem to say that we may have been slaved to our “tao”, our being? How does one now change its entire “being” in order to now do things significantly and fundamentally different? Current COIN doctrine is based on principles culled from conceptual theory that was developed over time from a number of classical theorists that observed and experienced success and failure in counterinsurgency;”[13] The original principals promulgated from regionally specific experience was meant to be more conceptual theory, adaptable, culturally nuanced to both the insurgent and counter insurgent and not prescriptive.

By simply assessing and promulgating change is this enough? Attempting to adjust and determine strategy, organization and capability based on changes in the character of the war, maybe even the very nature of the war; will we still be slaved to the essence of our conventional Air-Land Battle, Rapid Decisive Operations, Threats Based Planning “being”? And while the new assessment strives for bold, significant, daring, and significantly dramatic change will subordinate commanders and staff be capable of planning and implementing victory that will be measured in far different terms than we are accustomed to?[14] By simply redefining the fight and assessing getting the basics right are we capable of a radically different strategy that will accept the called for significant near term costs for the benefit of the long term?

By implication can we adapt a new “being” to accommodate this radical new strategy?

Framed differently, did we completely misunderstand? [For] *in war more than any other subject we must begin by looking at the nature of the whole; for here more than elsewhere the part and the whole must always be thought of together* [15] Or perhaps [moreover] *the more modest your own political aim the less importance you attach to it.*[16] That the aim of disarming the enemy “is in fact not always centered on reality and need not be fully achieved as a condition of peace. On no account should theory raise it to the level of a law.”[17]

But what if there was another way? To defeat an enemy with operations that have direct political repercussions.[18]

A number of thoughtful and prominent contributors to the counterinsurgency discourse such as Nagl, and Gentile, have attempted to provide frameworks yet at the same time have contributed to the division of ranks and schools of thought and may themselves have helped cultivate and increase the divide from and within the ranks[19]

“the influence of thought on thought is the most influential factor in history.”[20]

Integrating this population-centric whole of government approach requires a transformation in conflict approach. [21] Are we culturally capable to recognize that this is more than just semantics, more than degrees of separation between the doctrinal terms Stability Operations and

Counterinsurgency?[22] More importantly will we be able to translate the intellectual being change to effective, unified and successful action ?

[1] From the Free Dictionary <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Tao>, accessed 7 Oct 2009

[2] U.S Counterinsurgency Methods and The Global War on Terror, An Assessment: Tactical Success and Strategic Blunder, pp27-28, Tate Publishing, 2008

[3] Ibid, pp30-31

[4] The White House, May 1st 2003, "President Bush announces Major Combat Operations in Iraq Have Ended, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/05/print/20030501-15.html> accessed 7 Oct 2009

[5] COMISAF Assessment, Redacted, page 1-2

[6] Ibid p 2-1

[7] Ibid p1-2 and 1-3

[8] Ibid page 2-11

[9] The American Way of War, Critique and Implications, Colin S. Gray page 36 in Rethinking the Principles of War, Ed, Anthony D. McIvor

[10] The American Way of War, Critique and Implications, Colin S. Gray page 15 in Rethinking the Principles of War, Ed, Anthony D. McIvor

[11] On War, Ed and Tr, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Book One, Ch 2, p 97

[12] American Military Strategy, Samuel P Huntington, Policy Paper 28, pp 14-17

[13] By way of example Galula, C.E.Callwell, Thompson, Trinquier, and T.E. Lawrence are some of the "classical" theorists

[14] FM 3-07, Stability Operations , Oct 2008, p vi

[15] On War, page 75

[16] Ibid page 81

[17] Ibid page 91

[18] On War, page 92 "but there is another way. It is possible to increase the likelihood of success without defeating the enemies forces.I refer to operations that have direct political repercussions, that are designed in the first place to disrupt the opposing alliance.....

[19] See Joint Forces Quarterly, issue 52, 1st Quarter 2009, Point-Counterpoint, Lets Win The Wars We're In, John Nagl; And Lets Build an Army to Win All Wars, Gian Gentile.

[\[20\]](#) Ghost of Napoleon, Liddell Hart, p 11

[\[21\]](#) FM 3-07, Stability Operations , Oct 2008, p 1-4 and 1-6

[\[22\]](#) Is the basic difference between COIN and SO one of degrees of the basic fundamentals of insurgency? That is: Leadership, Vulnerable Population and a lack of government control. Is it a Counterinsurgency when you are more frequently the “target”?