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PERFORMANCE IN A MILITARIZED CULTURE

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Theater of War

On a hot calm night in early 2004, a Marine infantry battalion lumbered down a desert highway across the border from Kuwait into Iraq. They were headed north for Baghdad. I was among them as the unit's assistant operations officer. The American invasion the previous year had sparked an insurgency and the bulk of military forces that had been sent home during the summer of 2003 were now being ordered back to Iraq to form a counterinsurgency. Our mission, in short, was to “win the hearts and minds” of the Iraqi people and draw their support away from opponents to the US occupation. For the American military, this was a new “theater of war,” and indeed, a very different kind of performance.

Theater as a lexical designator for military battle space has been in use for nearly two centuries (Clausewitz [1832] 1976:280), but never before has the word been so congruous with the reality of American wars as it is today. War as “theater” is more than a clever metaphor, especially in the realm of counterinsurgencies such as Iraq and Afghanistan; it provides a useful framework for understanding the relationship between soldiers, the texts they embody (or attempt to), and the audiences for whom they perform. This analogy enables access to discourses and perspectives that might otherwise be overlooked and may enhance our understanding of the American soldier’s experience in contemporary armed conflict.

In the case of Iraq, especially prior to 2006, a minority of senior US military commanders advocated an emphasis on establishing rapport with the local populace to get them to favor us over the insurgents and recognize the American presence as legitimate. If this could be accomplished, they argued, the insurgency would lose its support base and collapse. This is the central premise and main effort of counterinsurgency doctrine. Fighting is anticipated, of course, but combat operations are regarded as more detrimental than constructive and, therefore, secondary to building popular support. So in Iraq, “winning hearts and minds” was more than a dubious slogan dished out to the American public, or even a specious gesture of good will; it was in fact the very heart of our military strategy, quite literally the objective of our return mission.
In this "hearts and minds" spirit, our division commander, General James Mattis, issued a rather unusual order before we entered Iraq in 2004. He told us that whenever we passed by any locals, we should smile broadly and wave at them from our gun trucks as we proceeded north to reinforce the occupation of their country. General Mattis called it "wave tactics" and insisted in all earnestness that this was how we were going to win the war—we were going to wave at them.

Moving northward, we were not unaware of the doctrinal contradictions that we embodied. Waving with one hand and wielding a weapon with the other sounded and felt every bit as absurd there in Iraq as it appears here on the page. Perhaps the extent to which this concerned us as individuals was revealed only subtly in our faces and the complex arrangements in our affect. Each hand was connected to an opposite affective intention. "Wave tactics" was, of course, only symbolic of the greater effort at hand, but it perfectly epitomized our paradoxical relationship to the Iraqi people.

Suddenly the term "theater of war" seemed to correspond very well with what we were actually doing—performing for an audience. This was by no means the first time a military ever performed power; however, the notion of seeking audience approval—getting them to believe us and believe in us rather than simply capitulate—and, that such approval was the cornerstone of mission accomplishment, was, in my mind, a unique situation that prompted a much higher level of self-conscious theatricality than normal combat operations ever would. Suddenly it mattered how I acted in front of civilian observers, and it mattered equally how they reacted—I needed them to like me.

At that point in my military career I was certainly accustomed to playing different roles in various positions, roles that didn't necessarily encapsulate my "total" worldview or my sense of identity, and yet this performance of congeniality struck me (and I think a great many others) as quite contradictory to the truculent affect that we'd habituated for so long as marines. And while this may have only been a matter of adaptation on our parts, there was a more serious dilemma emerging as well, a dilemma that was ultimately codified in the military's newest edition of the counterinsurgency manual.

Of course, I understood well enough that we needed to portray ourselves in an endearing manner toward the Iraqi people to elicit a friendly response and achieve our strategic aims. To that extent, the general's orders made sense. Where they made less sense was in the problem of survival and the crucially important, though seldom-mentioned, detail that our very presence had inspired significant hostility among Iraqis and had prompted many of them to attack us. The very real possibility of being killed made "wave tactics" more than just absurd; it elevated the problem to a cognitive impossibility and, therefore, rendered counterinsurgency doctrine an unperformable method.

**Soldier Street Theater**

From the collapsing narrative of a "war on terror" that made the entire world its theater emerged act two: counterinsurgency. In 2006, when public support for the war in Iraq had fallen to its lowest levels (Pew 2008), a field manual was drafted by the US military (resurrected, really, from the sepulcher of Vietnam War doctrine), a rewrite called *Counterinsurgency*, and was given the shorthand nomenclature *FM 3-24*. This was the doctrinal basis for President George W. Bush's "new strategy" in Iraq in 2007, popularly dubbed *the surge.* Politically, the *FM 3-24*
was offered to the American public as a narrative explanation and solution for the troubles in Iraq. But militarily it was an instructional document for soldiers, to be implemented in theaters of operation.

When counterinsurgency doctrine was built into the "war on terror" narrative, it could be regarded as mere rhetoric, that is, the "story" of American foreign policy. But when that same doctrine was handed to soldiers to perform in theaters of war, it was transformed into a script of sorts. More than simply a field manual with instructions on what to do in any given circumstance, the FM 3-24 functioned more like a set of scenarios, guiding soldier performance in the "field"—the "theater." In this sense, the doctrine functioned somewhat like theatrical dramaturgy, directing the actions, words, and arguably the thoughts of its performers. Soldiers became characters in the counterinsurgency story—actors in a theater of war.

Counterinsurgencies such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan, though commonly referred to as "wars," are conceptually and performatively very different from conventional battles. In one important respect, however, the two modes of conflict do not greatly differ. Both are, whether acknowledged explicitly or not, ultimately struggles for political and physical control over a territory, whether it is a country, a province, or a hilltop, and more specifically over the people who inhabit it. The FM 3-24 notes, "the long-term objective for all sides [of a counterinsurgency] remains acceptance of the legitimacy of one side's claim to political power" (US Army 2007:3). It is the manner in which power is gained and maintained that most distinguishes conventional wars from counterinsurgencies.

Among the obvious distinctions between conventional wars and counterinsurgencies, there are two that are especially relevant here. First is the contrasting sense of the word occupation. In conventional warfare, the "occupation" of an objective—that desired piece of ground or point on the map—generally implies success; it is the end state of the operation. Conversely, in counterinsurgencies, occupation is the starting point, a permanent and ineluctable condition of the tactical environment. The second distinction, which emerges from "occupation," is the presence of an audience.

In conventional warfare, military commanders do not consciously take into consideration an external "audience." Spectators viewing from home via the media are only peripherally considered in military strategy and the presence of civilians on the battlefield is, at best, an inconvenient reality of the terrain. But in counterinsurgencies, local civilians are the focal point or the "bid for victory" as it is called. They are the audience. "Winning hearts and minds" is the essence of counterinsurgencies and the central message of its doctrine (US Army 2007:294). Further, local civilians are expected to become performers themselves, through the performance of their own acquiescence to the legitimacy of the counterinsurgency.

But this theater is not, like in previous wars, played out in the jungle, the mountains, or in the open desert. This theater brings soldiers into local neighborhoods, street corners, market places, villages, and wherever else they might find an audience to perform their roles. So counterinsurgency becomes something like street theater—performances, often informal or improvised, that happen in the streets and other open public spaces. The premise of counterinsurgency doctrine relies upon cognitive antipodes that make the text, like contradictory stage directions, impossible to fully embody; counterinsurgency is, in essence, an unperformable script. But since, as with theater, "the show must go on," and since soldiers on the battlefield cannot simply walk away or stop acting, they must do something—so they improvise. I call this improvisational performance Soldier Street Theater.
The Double Improvisation

Counterinsurgency turns out to be a double improvisation. Surrounding the soldier's individual performance, the framework of the operation itself is constructed very much like improvisational theater. Improvisation is a key concept and the intended method of counterinsurgency doctrine; it is the fundamental mode by which insurgents are defeated:

[Insurgents] will do anything to preserve their greatest advantage, the ability to hide among the people. These amoral and often barbaric enemies survive by their wits, constantly adapting to the situation. Defeating them requires counterinsurgents to develop the ability to learn and adapt rapidly and continuously.

(US Army 2007:52)

The *FM 3-24* often characterizes the counterinsurgency environment as fluid and rapidly changing, and urges leaders to be ready to adapt it without guidance from higher headquarters. Likewise, in dramatic theater—especially in devised theater—improvisation is a method often used for developing productions with less authorial guidance or constraints, expanding the meaning of a text (if there is a text), or providing directors and actors increased initiative.

Counterinsurgency doctrine is prescriptive; however, the text itself is not typically consumed in the rank and file. The *FM 3-24* is written primarily for leaders and planners at the battalion level and above, who then propagate its principles among the troops through training programs, directives, procedures, operations orders, etc. This is not unlike a director and dramaturg developing scenes of a play through improvisation workshops and exercises rather than sending actors home to memorize lines in a script (Spolin 1963:15; Scholte 2010:24). Military training, especially counterinsurgency-specific training, often includes performing practical scenarios (like dress-rehearsals), in which soldiers learn their roles through practicing interactions.4

The most essential parallel between improvisational theater and counterinsurgencies is the prioritization of audience approval over a specifically predetermined denouement. Both performances allow the actors a great deal of flexibility to carry out their roles as they choose, within given constraints, with one central task: delight the audience, or, in counterinsurgency-speak, win their hearts and minds. Political leaders (behind the scenes, so to speak) who deploy troops into these roles clearly have broader objectives in mind; however, the same might be said of theater producers and owners. My central concern here, however, is the nature of the performance itself.

Despite the improvisational intention of counterinsurgency doctrine, there is a secondary improvisation that is produced, which is not in the design but results instead from a gap between the text and its performance. Generally speaking, a performative gap might result in situations where a text exceeds the capabilities of its contemporaneous technology, where the text is not physically achievable by its performers, or where the text has simply not given clear enough instructions or accounted for variable circumstances (Perl 2011:221).5 In all of these situations, improvisation is not directed by the text, but is nonetheless required by the inherent performative gaps produced by the text (Boudreau 2008:41). In counterinsurgencies, these are moments when soldiers cannot cognitively align themselves with the text; that is to say, they cannot perform the text literally. The performative gap, in which I argue their consciousness remains, is a gap precisely because of the hard edges of the text and the streets that hold them in.
Ambitious as a soldier might be to deliver a great performance, this gap cannot be avoided. The improvisation—the filling in for inadequate text—occurs in the ways that soldiers relate physically and interpersonally with locals and in the ways they relate to themselves and their use of force. No matter who the soldiers are, or what their attitudes, they cannot be fixed by or located within the doctrine; therefore, these improvisational actions must be characterized as extra- or non-doctrinal—they exceed the text.

Performances of counterinsurgency doctrine are therefore constrained to varying degrees by the text, stage direction, and space, much like theater performances are, but the question of textual "authority" seems less complicated for military performers. For example, when the counterinsurgency manual was first published, General David Petraeus was both the primary author of the text and the commander of all troops in theater. In that position, he exerted about as much authority as any author ever could—he was author, director, auteur. And with all the restrictions placed on soldiers by FM 3-24—physical, cultural, legal, etc.—there was not a great deal of latitude for radical interpretation. General Petraeus could specify how the text should be understood and then order it to be performed exactly as he intended.

But could he really?

Orders or not, different commanders and soldiers, under different circumstances, will understand the intent of counterinsurgency doctrine (and associated orders) differently, especially when the words are embodied and performed. No matter how authoritative a text may be, no matter how faithfully one attempts to interpret and perform its lines, there is a fundamental difference in the way meaning is processed in consciousness and how it is felt in the body. This is where we hear that common sentiment (often from veterans): "You can't understand unless you were there," which points to the undiminishable distance between text and body, and likewise between script and performance. W.B. Worthen put it this way: "Performing reconstitutes the text; it does not echo, give voice to, or translate the text [. . .] The meaning of theatrical performance cannot be attributed to the sovereign control of the dramatic text" (1998:1098). Alex Ferguson notes accordingly, "the performance isn’t ‘read’; it’s created neuromuscularly" (2010:40). Therefore, however counterinsurgency doctrine is read, whatever explanations have been provided, or orders have been issued, the soldier's understanding of them will be greatly impacted by the sheer embodiment of that text and, further, by the inescapable and terrifying reality that their textual bodies might then be killed in its performance.

Still, this is just the beginning of the problem, the first fissure in the widening gap between counterinsurgency doctrine and the operations it ostensibly guides. What is of greatest interest to me here are the "moments" in counterinsurgency doctrine that cognitively resist "faithful" performance and consequently compel certain individual improvisations within the larger improvisational framework that leave soldiers disconnected from the doctrine, from their audiences, and from themselves. This is the double improvisation.

Cognitive Unperformables

In the theater of counterinsurgency, the action is on the street. US soldiers (particularly combat and military police units) spend the majority of their time roving through cities and towns on "presence patrols" on foot or in vehicles, conducting house searches, and manning security checkpoints. They may also be involved in municipal development projects to restore essential services, build schools and roads, or provide medical treatment, or they may be training local military and police units (US Army 2007:156). But no matter the task or its purpose, each
involves daily interactions with the local populace, so soldiers are “in character” all the time. Cognitive unperformables involve the difficult conditions that are constantly present throughout an occupation and point to the conflicts inherent in modes of interaction with the local populace and the opposing psychological strategies required to enable operations.

The crucial problem is, as the counterinsurgency manual points out repeatedly, it is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish insurgents from civilians. Moreover, US military units may face popular resistance in their areas of operation with varying degrees of violence directed against them through roadside and car bombs, rocket and mortar attacks, ambushes, and bombings of facilities or infrastructure. What these types of attacks have (most importantly) in common is that they are all conducted from remote or concealed positions, so insurgents very often cannot be seen or identified and are frequently never found.

A soldier’s cognitive orientation toward the indigenous people is thrown into conflict. Who is friend? Who is foe? Survival, combat training, and warrior culture all urge a default to suspicion and the use of force; doctrine, however, often suggests otherwise with surprising maxims like, “Sometimes the more force is used, the less effective it is”; “sometimes doing nothing is the best reaction”; and “some of the best weapons for counterinsurgents do not shoot” (US Army 2007:47). At the heart of these admonishments is the proposition that soldiers are tasked to befriend the local populace, to improve their lives, to empathize and build rapport, and at the same time survive. This is the core of the turmoil from which Soldier Street Theater emerges.

As I’ve noted earlier, the authors of the manual are not cavalier about the use of force in a counterinsurgency environment, but neither are they squeamish. Refer to the following passages from the manual:

Counterinsurgents often achieve the most meaningful success in garnering public support and legitimacy for the [local] government with activities that do not involve killing insurgents (though, again, killing clearly will often be necessary).

Not only is there a moral basis for the use of restraint or measured force; there are practical reasons as well. Needlessly harming innocents can turn the populace against the COIN effort [. . .] Kindness and compassion can often be as important as killing and capturing insurgents.

(US Army 2007:49, 167)

The manual’s foreword by Generals David Petraeus and James Amos captures this tension in a single line: “[Leaders] must ensure their Soldiers and Marines are ready to be greeted with either a handshake or a hand grenade” (US Army 2007:xlvii; emphasis added). And co-author Colonel John Nagl articulates the point equally succinctly in his 23 August 2007 interview with Jon Stewart on Comedy Central’s The Daily Show: “If I could sum up the book in just a few words it would be: Be polite, be professional, be prepared to kill.”

It’s interesting to note that Jon Stewart’s studio audience laughed at that remark. Perhaps they found humor in its irony or its cynicism, or maybe they detected its inherent disingenuousness. Politeness that foregrounds a sincere willingness to kill must, if nothing else, render the politeness itself insincere. Advocates of the doctrine may argue that the politeness is only nullified once hostility has presented itself. But this cannot be so; if it were, then soldiers would never be truly prepared to kill. They would never be ready for the hand grenade.
Being prepared means activating an attitude of aggression before it becomes necessary to use it, and this sensibility is reflected in military training, in which a kind of bloodlust culture is cultivated. And conversely, being ready for a handshake requires no particular preparation at all. So the maxim “be ready for a handshake or a hand grenade” can be reduced to “be ready for a hand grenade” without altering its meaning. The same reduction can be applied to John Nagl’s comment. He need only have said: “Be prepared to kill.” A counterinsurgent’s polite veneer cannot conceal his mistrust because the mistrust is the engine of his survival. Nobody is fooled by courtesy that comes at the end of a machine gun.

To make better sense of this disparity as it plays out in the individual consciousness, we need to understand just what is meant by the phrase, “be prepared to kill.” What exactly does that entail? The essential cognitive strategy for being prepared to kill, which the US military trains its officers and troops for vigorously, is frequently referred to by observers outside the military as desensitization. The military may prefer a more euphemistic term like “mental toughness,” but the object remains the same. A soldier is conditioned to use weapons instinctively and without sentimentality to avoid the reluctance to kill. They rehearse in order to ensure that their spontaneous—improvisational—response in the war theater will be appropriate. Whether this reluctance is naturally human or socially constructed is immaterial; the objective of combat training is to dismantle it. Connected to desensitization is dehumanization. I distinguish the latter as the negation of other people’s humanity, while the former as a negation of one’s own.

Dehumanization is not a term used as part of official military doctrine but it is, nevertheless, an unavoidable attribute of the warrior culture and product of the fact that soldiers are fighting people who are trying to kill them. Training recruits to turn away from their own humanity and the humanity of the enemy is simply the most efficient way to get more soldiers to fight, kill, and ultimately to win battles. This disconnect between soldiers and themselves and between soldier and enemy is only compounded by their martial comportment and all the body and vehicle armor that lies between soldiers and the people whose “hearts and minds” they are trying to win.

Conversely, in order to connect with other human beings, to befriend them, to earn their trust or respect, the fundamental skill required is empathy, that is, the ability to imagine oneself in another person’s shoes, recognize their humanity, share their points of view, and feel their emotions, or at least to make space in one’s imagination for these “other” views and emotions. These two modes of relation, desensitization and empathy, are not simply difficult to do simultaneously; they are entirely antithetical, sitting on opposite ends of a human relation continuum. The harder soldiers try to identify and connect with local people, the more vulnerable they become to attack. The more they protect themselves with armor, weapons, sunglasses, etc. and a desensitized, dehumanized view and the world, the less able they will be to ever build the kind of rapport that the FM 3-24 calls for.

Balance between these extremes is an illusion. The combined pressures of military culture, combat training, and a desire to stay alive will always draw soldiers toward desensitization. The FM 3-24 reveals some recognition of this problem when it points out that counterinsurgents must assume greater personal risk to effectively maintain the peace. For example, the section on “leadership” includes a vignette, in which three soldiers were killed by a roadside bomb in an area where other soldiers had been walking the streets for months without incident. This event angered the rest of the unit and tempted them to go into town looking for payback. From the manual: “A squad leader stood up in their living quarters and asserted that there would be a pile of dead Arabs on the street when the platoon went out the next day.” The commander,
however, convinced these soldiers that revenge was not honorable and ultimately did not serve their mission of “winning the respect of the populace” (US Army 2007:244).

The emphasis of the story, of course, is to remind leaders to maintain their soldiers' patience and a temperate view of the locals; however, it also highlights the natural tendency in soldiers under these strained circumstances to gravitate toward anger, fear, or hostility, rather than empathy. If that were not the case, it would not have been necessary to include this vignette in the text. It is certainly possible, though probably unusual, for an individual soldier to lean toward empathy and ignore his/her personal safety, but because such a choice would compromise security, the empathetic soldier would likely be viewed as a liability to other soldiers focused more on their own survival and that of their comrades than on the feelings of the locals. Empathy implies, in essence, combat ineffectiveness.

During my own time in Iraq, “wave tactics” continued until a roadside bomb detonated near one of our vehicular patrols. A marine standing in the turret of a gun truck was hit by a small piece of shrapnel; it entered his body through the armhole in his flak vest and sliced into his lungs. We’d been in Iraq for one week. One week and all the paradoxes of counterinsurgency doctrine faded away and our psychological conflict was resolved. There was no longer any question how we should respond to the Iraqi people and no longer much concern about how they responded to us. After that, there was no more mention of “wave tactics” and not much use for the “winning hearts and minds” philosophy, not in the common sense of soldiers on the street.

Given these conditions—the danger on the street, the unidentifiable enemy, the combat training, the warrior culture, and the natural (and reasonable) interest in survival—it is unrealistic to suppose that soldiers will not be suspicious of and closed off toward the local people, among whom insurgents lurk, especially when those soldiers start taking casualties. It would be militarily imprudent for them to be otherwise. However, this problem, which is pervasive in the occupation environment, does indeed culminate in physical behavior, not just ideations. Choices are made and actions are taken. When the real-life dilemma arises for soldiers, to shoot or not to shoot, there will be resolution and usually within seconds of the potential threat presenting itself. This is the moment of commitment to one course of action that utterly excludes the other. There is no reversing this commitment once it’s been made.

Similarly, though of course with less dire consequences, an actor on stage may improvise a performance, but each movement or utterance that is made represents an irreversible commitment from which further improvisation must proceed. For soldiers and actors alike, each and every commitment functions to solidify their trajectories. Past actions form constraints that limit the possibilities for future actions. In other words, once a deed has been done, the world, the theater, and the individual will be forever altered. In a counterinsurgency, the terrible difficulty is knowing on each occasion which commitment to make—to shoot or not to shoot. Oftentimes soldiers will not know if they’ve made the right choice until after the choice has already been made and the blood has been shed. For example, there were an alarming number of cases in Iraq, referred to as “escalation of force” incidents, in which soldiers harmed non-combatants in what they perceived as acts of self-defense through varying degrees of violence. In my own experience, these incidents outnumbered the occasions where the threat turned out to be real.

I can attest that procedural measures were taken at the command level to reduce these violent misidentifications. As an assistant operations officer, I was often tasked to confirm that the battalion’s checkpoints were established in accordance with the guidance from higher echelons
of command. And I believe further that these tragic incidents weighed heaviest on the soldiers
themselves.8 The pressure I received to look closely at these scenarios came increasingly from
the soldiers who stood at the checkpoints even after higher command was satisfied that all that
could be done to minimize misidentifications was being done.9

But the very nature of the problem that I’m describing here precluded any procedural
remedy, save an outright end to the occupation. And with every incident, whether the threat
was real or mistaken, whether the choice to shoot was right or wrong, the tension between
the cognitive antipodes—empathy and desensitization—was made all the more taut and the
doctrine all the more unperformable.

If uncertain circumstances arise, if a potential threat is perceived that compels a soldier to
use force, to kill, to strike, or to handle roughly a local inhabitant, in that moment, the “win­
ning hearts and minds” effort is subordinated to the practical necessity of the soldier’s own
survival. Soldiers are then left with the disconcerting and rather unanswerable question: Did I
kill a friend or a foe? The inadvertent killing of non-combatants may, of course, occur in any
type of warfare—conventional or irregular—but what makes these incidents within a coun­
terinsurgency particularly insidious is how integral they seem to the program.

In counterinsurgencies, “escalation of force” incidents must be thought of as occupation(al)
necessities, not “incidental” at all, but systemic. They are as inevitable as the threats that soldiers
are trying to protect themselves from when the incidents occur. This systematicity combined
with its inherently deleterious effects on counterinsurgents’ task to win hearts and minds
makes the killing all the more difficult to justify. In such circumstances, soldiers have no doc­
trine, no mission, and no greater cause to lean on, to justify their killing. They are, in essence,
alone with their deeds and have only their lives to show for it.

In whatever ways soldiers find to resolve this moral dilemma, however they get them­
selves through, mentally and emotionally, their strategies will be utterly their own, not scripted
for them in the FM 3-24. This pushes soldiers’ moral judgments into contexts other than
counterinsurgency doctrine and forces the subsequent improvisation. The improvisation
lies in the judgment itself and the manual becomes a meaningless prop in the theater of
counterinsurgency.

Cognitive improvisation is required in every moment of a counterinsurgency operation
by every individual soldier, whether commander or troop. And when counterinsurgents must
improvise individually, the organizations they comprise must improvise as well—that is to say,
operations inherently reflect the human capabilities of the people carrying them out. Just as
an individual soldier chooses, moment by moment, whether to empathize with a man on the
street, or prepare to kill him, a unit commander must also base his operations on that inflexible
reality—a reality that he will have already internalized and fully understood himself because
he too is subject to the same human cognitive limitations.

Insofar as counterinsurgency doctrine is cognitively unperformable, the tactics employed in
such an operation must, to the same degree, be improvisations. So we may think of coun­
terinsurgency operations as both cognitively and tactically improvisational outside the constraints
of the text. And to the extent that counterinsurgency operations cannot be fully aligned
with the tenets of the FM 3-24, they cannot be characterized as doctrinal. Even partial align­
ment separates them entirely from the logic of the text because “being compassionate” while
simultaneously “being preparèd to kill” is the essence of counterinsurgency strategy; it is, as
John Nagl notes, “the sum” of the doctrine (US Army 2007:xiii–xx). Removing either term
changes the bottom line.
The term *Soldier Street Theater* is delivered here with intentional irony and may even be thought of as somewhat oxymoronic because street theater is often understood as a form of political theater performed, in particular, by people resisting or expressing dissatisfaction with the state, its policies, or its social or cultural practices (Boal [1979] 1985; Schechner 2006; Lumbera 2010). Augusto Boal, for example, is well known for his theater of the oppressed, which was often performed in the street and created specifically as a result of his concerns about the tendency in traditional theater to reproduce and reinforce the power structures of society.

Similarly, the term guerrilla theater, another brand of street theater, was coined by R.G. Davis in the Vietnam War era as a type of anti-war demonstration (Carlson 1996:180). Davis writes in an article for the *Tulane Drama Review* that guerrilla theater is so called to connote the struggle with an oppressive regime. Like guerrilla fighters, he says, “Guerrilla theater travels light and makes friends of the populace” (132). US counterinsurgents would likely say the same of their military patrols. Guerrilla theater has survived the decades and is still practiced today in various forms of reality theater but most often with political aims in mind. Street theater is often impromptu and improvised very much like *Soldier Street Theater*. And both are politically driven, though clearly the two performances are not the same. *Soldier Street Theater* is more like a negative projection of guerrilla theater; everything is reversed into a sort of anti-theater.

While the most common street theater performers are typically agents for the oppressed, soldiers are essentially agents for power, performing on behalf of the state. They carry guns and use them. They seek popular support but offer no referendum—they’re not leaving if they don’t get it. They are immune from local law, though they retain the authority to enforce it. They are very nearly perfect opposites of those small powerless groups who typically perform street theater. And yet the soldiers are indeed on the street, they are performing, they are improvising, and to varying degrees they are trying to appeal to local audiences. This makes counterinsurgency soldiers different than other military forces that are exclusively performing power. US soldiers are performing something else, something not easily defined: a rather awkward friendship through firearms.

Ironically, there are friendships that do emerge between counterinsurgents and locals at every level from riflemen to commanders. What can we say about this? Surely these kinds of relationships must be accounted for; they are often the source of American soldiers’ deepest pride. It makes sense that they should be; such friendships are emblematic of the *winning hearts and minds mission* and in a sense living “proof” that it was achieved. But do these relationships truly demonstrate the doctrine’s validity? Do they negate my claims of its unperformability?

It may be safe to assume that once a soldier has personally befriended a particular member of local populace that that soldier will no longer be cognitively divided. Survival will not be at stake and the skills required for staying alive including “being prepared to kill” can be set aside with respect to that particular person. Winning the hearts and minds of those specific individuals in personal relationships becomes a more manageable affair. However, the existence of personal relationships between some soldiers and some locals does not alter the broader performance in counterinsurgency theater. Even if every last soldier in the country developed at least five personal friends among the locals, which is implausible in the best of circumstances, that total would still represent an inconsequential figure. In Iraq, for example, five friendships for each of 150,000 troops would only amount to roughly 5 percent of the overall population,
leaving the other 95 percent of Iraqis not in personal relationships with soldiers, all of whom would witness the counterinsurgency soldier-performers as strangers. And, therefore, all of those millions of Iraqis remain, from the perspective of the soldiers, a potential threat requiring all the warrior vigilance survival demands.

There are other unsettling aspects of these “friendships” between soldiers and locals that also deserve attention. Heartfelt testimonies by soldiers about their close ties with particular locals are convincing, as they should be. There is no reason to doubt their sincerity; nothing particular is gained by fabricating such a bond. And yet, relationships between counterinsurgents and local citizens are deeply problematic in ways that are seldom mentioned in mainstream discourses. These friendships must, by virtue of the political circumstances that have thrown them together, be unbalanced, resting on the condition of American power. So a friendship can be sustained only as long as the local concedes the political, legal, and perhaps even moral authority of the US military. If the local “friend” challenges the authority of the counterinsurgent, then the friendship will dissolve.

This reality is exemplified well in Iraq in 2011, when the Iraqi government asserted that any US troops remaining in country after the November withdrawal would lose legal immunity. The US called that a “deal breaker.” The same result would have to occur at the personal level if a local were to suggest that his counterinsurgent “friend” should, for example, surrender operational control of a given area or operate under local legal authority. Counterinsurgents will always insist that they want to transfer authority to the local government as quickly as possible—such a shift would signal success. However, such a claim comes with the presupposition that the transfer occurs within terms acceptable to the United States. If the locals don’t perform the script provided by the counterinsurgents, the performance fails.

For better or worse, “friendships” in a counterinsurgency will always be subordinated to US authority. This casts a dubious light on the testimonies of such relationships. It doesn’t necessarily suggest disingenuousness on the part of the soldiers as much as it reflects the nature of power itself. “Power” is never introspective; its gaze is always directed outward. Likewise, agents of power such as counterinsurgents are very typically unaware of their own privilege within interpersonal relationships that they may regard as equitable or benign. Soldiers performing their street theater exert power over the locals by occupying their space.

US counterinsurgents often characterize themselves as arbiters or facilitators of security and ultimately of peace in a given region but seem to pay little attention to the impact that such self-proclaimed and violently obtained authority might have on the local population. Ultimately, the very proclamation of friendship turns out to be just another means by which Americans can declare their performance a success without ever truly seeing the audience. The point of any performance is to engage an audience. Viola Spolin once remarked, “The audience is the most revered member of the theater. Without an audience there is no theater” (1963:15). That observation would be equally apt in counterinsurgency theater. The FM 3-24 notes, “At its core, counterinsurgency is a struggle for the population's support” and “arguably the decisive battle is for the people's minds” (US Army 2007:51) For counterinsurgents, audience is everything. In counterinsurgency theater, the performance is in the streets, in the markets, in the homes, in the hospitals, in schools, and in neighborhoods. Soldier Street Theater is everywhere and so the audience has no choice but to show up. Counterinsurgents already have power over the people’s bodies; therefore, the decisive battle must be for their minds.

One of the fundamental concerns for Augusto Boal in the Theater of the Oppressed is giving agency to spectators. Following Brecht, who strove to alienate his audiences from his
characters to enable a more active social critique, Boal advanced this idea so that audiences did more than just critique; they actually participated as "spectactors." The goal, foremost, was to deliver a sense of empowerment and equality to all those involved in the performance—players and spectators alike—until everyone was both, and those demarcating lines were vanished (Boal [1979] 1985). Another more recent example along these lines comes from Louis-Martin Guay, who created the "Theater of the Unexpected," also politically oriented and driven by an interest in social justice. Guay uses improvisation as a central method for creation. He notes, "spontaneity gives birth to a unique connection between actor and spectator," rendering the stage/house dichotomy obsolete (2010:6). That connection is made possible by an atmosphere of equality.

Here again, Soldier Street Theater appears as a negative image of such productions. The performance is surely interactive; the locals are necessarily spectators and participants but the relationship is utterly unequal—politically, legally, and physically. Perhaps the most important freedom that soldier performers enjoy that local audiences do not is the freedom to leave when the show is over. Soldiers will return home to the safety and comfort of the US while their audiences will remain locked in the "theater of the aftermath" to live out their lives in whatever ruins and death were left in the wake of their performance. There is a natural indifference built into this arrangement that may very well be the most decisive and ineradicable demarcating line between counterinsurgents and the populace.

With these paradoxes in mind, I suggest that soldiers are in fact engaged in a sort of anti-performance. Their improvisations alienate the audience, but unlike with Brecht, the alienation is not intended, not pedagogical, and certainly not desirable; it is, however, inevitable. As soldiers build up their defenses, emotionally, physically, and morally, an impenetrable barrier is created between themselves and the populace. The soldiers may be physically safe from harm (or safer, anyway, than they would have been without such defenses), but through the barriers they've built they can neither see, nor hear, nor feel the humanity of the people whom they've shut out. And the audience, likewise, is no more able to feel or empathize with the actors than soldiers can feel or empathize with the locals. Regardless of either one's political disposition, it is difficult, probably impossible, to connect with each other through all the suspicion, the fear, the hostility, the caution, the protocol, the culture, the armor, and the violence that divides them. After all the bombings, raids, and patrols, the type of empathy that actors and audiences seek simply cannot be achieved.

The ultimate question of any performance is always this: How did the audience respond? And in counterinsurgencies the answer is always vague. Apologists for American occupations will generally tout unconvincing benefits of the mission—freedom and democracy, physical security, improvements to political and economic infrastructure, and development of municipal services. But none of these can be taken out of the larger context of a violent invasion and a lengthy occupation, both of which comprise considerable bloodshed.

The FM 3-24 offers two measurements for success in counterinsurgencies: First, the Measure of Performance (MOP), how well an operation is executed; and second the Measure of Effectiveness (MOE), how well that operation achieved the unit's larger goals. American counterinsurgents tend to focus on the former, leaving the question of effectiveness almost entirely un-discussed. It is, in fact, quite difficult to measure effectiveness in a counterinsurgency and there's no single way to do it. But there is a list of indicators available in the manual that can be referenced for estimation. At the top of that list of ways that one might tell if a performance is effective or not is by the number of "Acts of Violence" that have occurred in a given region.
The Baker-Hamilton *Iraq Study Group* report (2006), a critical analysis of the progress of the US occupation at that time, describes “significant underreporting” in Iraq as a serious problem, a point they illustrate through “acts of violence.” They note, “On one day in July 2006 there were 93 attacks or significant acts of violence reported. Yet a careful review of the reports for that single day brought to light 1,100 acts of violence. Good policy is difficult to make when information is systematically collected in a way that minimizes its discrepancy with policy goals.” To this, I would add that it’s difficult to render a good performance, or improve that performance, when the audience’s response is systematically ignored.

**The Performance Goes On**

It has been argued, perhaps over-optimistically, that the US will no longer take on such massive counterinsurgency campaigns in the future. In a speech at the Pentagon in 2012, President Barack Obama declared “the end of nation-building with large military footprints” and that “US forces will no longer be sized to conduct large scale prolonged stability operations” (Obama 2012b). This, however, does not guarantee the US will not find itself, intentionally or not, in exactly this kind of large-scale counterinsurgency again. Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq have certainly demonstrated that these situations tend to creep up unanticipated.

On the other hand, the *United States Government Counterinsurgency Guide* predicts, “Whether the United States should engage in any particular counterinsurgency is a matter of political choice, but that it will engage in such conflicts during the decades to come is a near certainty” (Cohen 2009:n.p.). A 2012 Defense Department document titled “Priorities for 21st Century Defense” signed by President Obama noted, perhaps with this possibility in mind, that the military would remain “ready to conduct limited counterinsurgency and other stability operations if required,” and therefore would “retain and continue to refine the lessons learned, expertise, and specialized capabilities that have been developed over the past ten years in Iraq and Afghanistan” (Obama 2012a:6).

Those lessons learned have been consolidated in the *FM 3-24* (its most recent edition released in May 2014), and that manual remains the primary source of knowledge for the US military should such an operation come about in the future. The doctrine found in the *FM 3-24* is not in any sense obsolete. But counterinsurgency doctrine, whether or not it appears to be politically or strategically effective, cannot be valid as a doctrine if it does not actually guide what soldiers are doing in theaters of operations. These operations may resemble the doctrine but only superficially. In terms of their own principles, the two are incompatible.

I want to emphasize here that I am not arguing whether or not counterinsurgency operations can be tactically efficacious or whether they might be able to achieve some political objective; rather, those operations are fundamentally disjointed from the central tenets of the *FM 3-24* and, therefore, cannot be thought of as doctrinally driven. This is an important point, I believe, since the counterinsurgency manual was sold, quite literally, to the American public as the rationale for continued operations in Iraq and for its continued use today. The manual was dubiously employed by the Bush administration in a public affairs maneuver to obtain support for its policy objectives through the rhetoric of military tactics. So if the logic of the doctrine fails, then support for the operation should certainly be called into question.

The unperformability of the *FM 3-24* lies foremost in soldiers’ embodied understanding of the text; that is to say, interpretation arrives through acts of encountering and judging local people in a physical environment (friend or foe), and choosing moment to moment whether
to be compassionate or prepared to kill. This is the disparity between an unperformable script and the improvisations that follow in the theater of counterinsurgency. It is the inevitable gap that grows in the theatrical performance of soldiers attempting to win hearts and minds and simultaneously stay alive.

It is an anti-performance for an anti-audience, in which all the physical and emotional barriers that stand between soldiers and locals are like a curtain that never goes up, dividing actors from audiences, and preventing any meaningful exchange of humanity. Under these circumstances, soldiers are left without any firm basis upon which to make sense of their own deeds and, consequently, the FM 3-24 forces them into ethically ambiguous terrain. That is a desperate place to be after a war and is certainly a source of emotional turmoil. The FM 3-24 does not, in itself, create these circumstances; it is merely a textual artifact of the struggle between a political narrative and the military's attempt to perform it.

The doctrine cannot be modified or repaired; it cannot be set aside. It is a fundamental expression of empire in the political and cultural context of the 21st century, in which earlier, more overtly aggressive forms of military conquest are no longer in fashion. The narratives and performances of American domination must generally resonate with its citizens' sense of national identity. If they do not, political leaders will find themselves unable to effectively gain popular support for military operations and, consequently, be unable to marshal the human, fiscal, and material resources required to conduct such operations. Even the word itself—empire—now carries a negative connotation in the public, where in former empires this was not the case. The American story of itself does not include foreign conquests, so when America's leaders find it necessary to militarily dominate another country, the performance of domination must look like something else. For the moment, that something else is called counterinsurgency.

Counterinsurgency doctrine does not produce ideology; it re-produces ideology. It is a natural manifestation of a system of values already in place, of a narrative already in motion. Soldier Street Theater can be best understood, I think, in terms of Boal's critique of traditional dramaturgy: It's not the performance itself that is the problem; it's the entire structure of the theater that produces a particular kind of performance and a particular relationship between performers and audiences. There is no value in rewriting the script; the power dynamics remain unchanged. The FM 3-24 is a contemporary rendition of an old play. It's imperialism with "wave tactics." The only solution then, however difficult, must be to tear down the theater—the theater of war.

Notes

1 President Bush introduced the "new way forward" in a speech to the nation on 10 January 2007. The Counterinsurgency Field Manual (FM 3-24) was published just a few weeks earlier in December 2006.
2 See Sarah Sewall's introduction to the "Counterinsurgency Field Manual" (2007). She writes, "The official story is simply that US doctrine needed updating to help US forces combat insurgents in Afghanistan and Iraq. But this can hardly explain the voracious public appetite for 282 pages bristling with acronyms and numbered paragraphs. With over two million downloads after its first two months on the Internet, the counterinsurgency (COIN) manual clearly touched a nerve" (2007:xxi).
3 I use the word "soldier" as a generic designator for all US military personnel, irrespective of branch of service.
4 See Packing Inferno where I describe Marine Corps training at "Matilda Village," a simulated Iraqi village in California (Boudreau 2008:25).
5 See Perl (2011) for some specific examples of music texts that were altered in performance due to physical limitations of instrument, performer, or text.
6 For a discussion of Marine Corps boot camp training, see Packing Inferno: "Manufacturing Killers" (Boudreau 2008:79).
7 The simplest example of this is the "checkpoint scenario" where soldiers are forced to discern bombers among the many vehicles that approach their position.
8 I think the alarming veteran suicide rate reflects a great deal of moral angst among service members (see Ungar 2012; Kristof 2012; and AP 2013).
9 For an example of my experience of the escalation of force problem, see Boudreau (2008:167).
11 The University of Chicago Press 2007 commercial edition of the counterinsurgency manual was marketed and sold successfully on Amazon.com among many other booksellers. US Army Colonel John Nagl made appearances around the country and on many television programs in a curious "book tour" meant to bring attention to, and support for, the newly drafted doctrine.

References


