

THE DRY SPONGE THEORY:

Maximizing the use of 'Money as a Weapon System' in COIN

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Introduction

As a profession largely dedicated to the application of unconventional warfare to “enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt or overthrow a government or occupying power,” it is important that our commitment to “life-long learning and transformation” fully captures lessons of the past in order to best prepare us for the future. At a glance, tactical training in special operations forces has successfully captured tactical and operational lessons learned from our 50-year history and incorporated them into our training. However, it is also important that our profession quickly capture lessons learned from our most recent conflicts to better prepare for our uncertain future.

Although not a new concept, it wasn't until 2009 that the Army officially published a handbook on “Money as a Weapon System”. Based on a quote from then Maj. Gen. David Petraeus, then commanding general of the 101st Airborne Division, the term is used to describe how “Warfighters at brigade, battalion and company level in a counterinsurgency environment employ money as a weapons system to win the hearts and minds of the indigenous populations to facilitate defeating the insurgents.” Unfortunately, the proper application of MAWS extends far beyond the tactical and operational levels of warfare and should be considered as part of the overall strategic nature of modern COIN operations.

In the 1958 political novel *The Ugly American*, Eugene Burdick and William Lederer set the setting for the strategic nature of effective MAWS. Set in the fictitious country of Sarkhan near Thailand and Myanmar, the book describes the conflict between the United States and Russia over Southeast Asia as part of the Cold War. In the story, a newly appointed U.S. Ambassador struggles to understand why political support leans more toward Russia than the U.S., despite grossly outspending their rivals. In prophetic fashion, the authors reveal that most of the money spent in Sarkhan does little to help the Sarkhan people. The Ambassador grows to realize that building expensive modern highways is good for American businesses, yet has little effect on rural citizens of Sarkhan. In contrast, the Russians continually employ a less expensive methodology that directly benefits

simple farmers. In reality, the Cold War ended with an American victory following the fall of the Berlin Wall, yet the strategic nature of spending money in COIN environments has not been fully articulated in the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

With this in mind, two characteristics are likely true for the U.S. in the post-conflict future: military budgets will continue to decrease and threats to America will require the continued application of UW. Therefore, with shrinking budgets and increasing threats facing our military future, the U.S. strategic imperative must quickly shift from how much money do we spend to how well do we spend it?

Money as a Weapon System

Survival in battle requires Soldiers who are proficient in the employment of multiple weapons systems and most tactical training time is devoted to honing skills of lethality. To do this requires Soldiers who understand both the strengths and weaknesses of each weapon and how they are best employed on the battlefield. Not surprisingly, the same requirements must be maintained when utilizing MAWS.

Effective weapons application requires training at multiple levels. Flat ranges and shoot houses prepare Soldiers to fire weapons at multiple targets utilizing various marksmanship techniques. Field training requires Soldiers to be trained in the use of range cards and sector sketches to help units maximize the effects of their weapons and to sustain these effects for as long as possible. Even rules of engagement exist to help warfighters determine when and how their weapons can be employed in various combat situations. However, when we consider training for the use of MAWS, similar methods of training are difficult to determine.

To bridge the gap between training and practical uses of MAWS, the Center for Army Lessons Learned developed the Commander's Guide to Money as a Weapons System. However, as with any training manual for other weapons, handbooks aren't enough. Likewise, the MAWS Handbook is oriented to “company-, battalion- and brigade-level officers and noncommissioned officers” yet fails to provide the detailed guidance necessary for the strategic employ-

ment of MAWS. In fact, the guidance below is as specific as it gets:

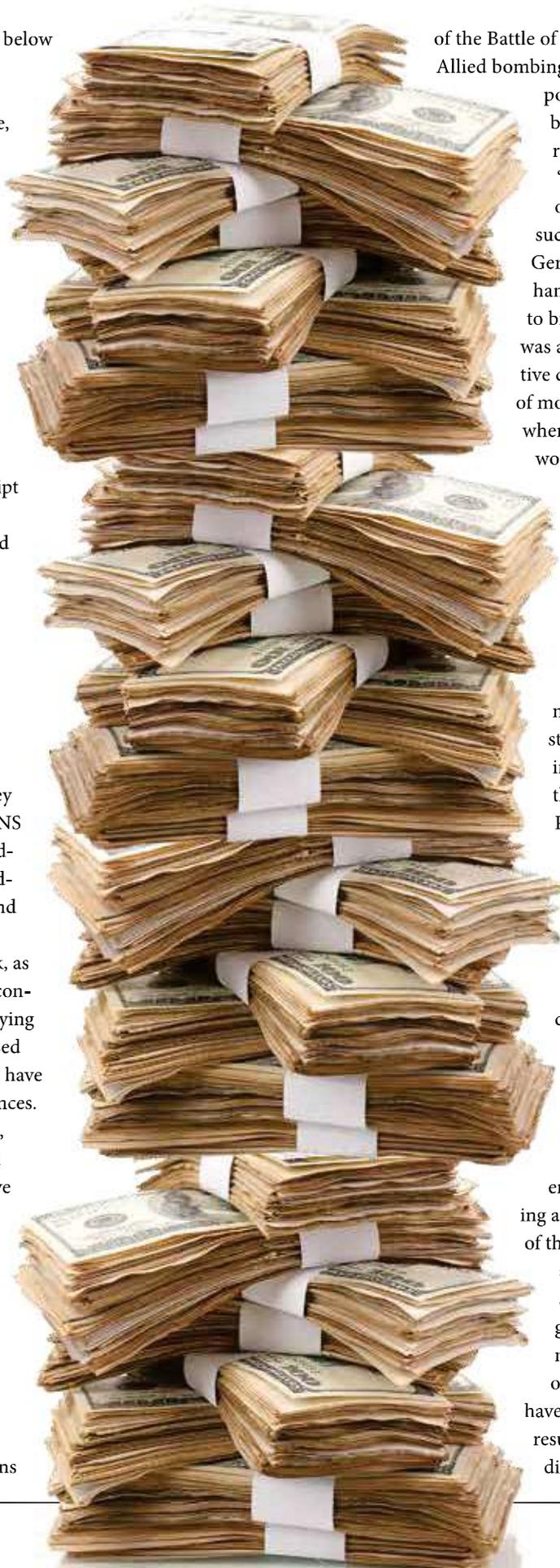
While warfighters receive training on most weapons systems they will use, most receive little if any training on MAWS prior to deployment. Use the acronym WEAPONS to remember the seven steps in funding warfighters:

- Work to identify the requirement and appropriate funding authority.
- Estimate the cost and ensure funding is available.
- Attain required approval(s).
- Purchase the goods of services.
- Oversee the requirement to receipt or completion.
- Notify the appropriate authorized U.S. government agency (USG) disbursement agency when the goods/services are received or project is complete.
- Secure the appropriate documentation.

Although the MAWS Handbook provides valuable tactical and operational aspects to the spending of money in a COIN environment, the WEAPONS acronym does little to assist senior leaders and policy makers with understanding the strategic nature of how we spend money on the battlefield.

Additionally, the MAWS Handbook, as a training manual, fails to adequately consider the hazards of improperly employing weapon systems. For most weapons used by our Soldiers, poor employment can have severe short- and long-term consequences. Examples include wasted ammunition, melted barrels and increased collateral damage. Not to mention, these negative consequences contribute to unsustainable budget requirements, ammunition shortages, loss of morale for our Soldiers, reduced domestic support (typically resulting from increased casualty rates) and reduced international or coalition support.

When considering money as a strategic weapon, the comparison between the German bombing campaigns



of the Battle of Britain in 1940 compared to the Allied bombing of Germany from 1942-1945 portrays harsh contrasts. Although both operations involved long-range bombing of enemy cities, the “allied attacks against [German] oil and ball bearing production” succeeded in “almost bringing the Germans to their knees.” On the other hand, Germany’s air campaign failed to bring about Britain’s surrender and was a strategic failure. Similar negative consequences for the improper use of money have an even greater impact when considering the strategic framework of insurgent warfare.

The Strategic Framework of Insurgent Warfare

Multiple theories and models have been developed to understand insurgency and counter-insurgency warfare. The theory most useful to understanding the strategic framework involved in insurgency and COIN operations is the “Diamond” model developed by Professor Gordon McCormick. According to Colonel Greg Wilson, who utilized the “Diamond” model to describe the U.S. approach in the Southern Philippines, “[the diamond] model provides a useful framework in developing a holistic approach to separate insurgent or terrorist organizations...from their base of popular support so they can be isolated, captured or killed.”

In McCormick’s model, the government and insurgents are competing against each other for the support of the people utilizing unique strengths and weaknesses that makes popular support either sides’ center of gravity. According to the model, military forces have the advantage of strength while the insurgents have the information advantage. This results in a government which cannot directly attack the insurgents (can’t



SCHOOL FUNDING Afghan elders inventory a recent influx of supplies donated by members of Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-Afghanistan to a school in Shah Wali Kot district, northern Kandahar province. *U.S. Army photo.*

find them), and insurgents who can't directly attack the government (too weak).

As the competition for the support of the people under McCormick's model continues, everything that is done by the government or the insurgents will either increase or decrease popular support. The employment of MAWS, like any other weapons system, must be employed to enhance rather than diminish the government's relationship with the people.

The Dry Sponge Theory

The dry sponge analogy is intended to be a tool that strategic leaders can use, in addition to McCormick's "Diamond" model, to maximize the strategic application of MAWS in COIN environments. Understanding the dry sponge provides strategic guidance for the proper application of MAWS while showcasing the consequences of the ineffective use of money.

The sponge used in this metaphor starts out dry and rigid. When water is poured onto the sponge, some water is absorbed while the rest becomes run-off. If a glass of water is poured onto the sponge too quickly, only a small amount is absorbed and the majority of the water is wasted. However, if water is poured slowly, the sponge absorbs most of the water thus achieving full-saturation. When this happens, wasted water is limited to mere drops and the glass of water does not empty quickly. Most importantly the sponge absorbs the water more completely so that the entire object is uniformly wet. As the sponge dries over time, the filled glass is still available to keep the sponge moist.

Using this metaphor, the sponge represents the host nation prior to U.S. involvement and the water represents money. When money is introduced into a foreign economy too quickly, only high-level government representatives benefit from the money. The rest of the wasted money is funneled to support areas of corruption and quite possibly the insurgency itself. Most importantly, the center of gravity as identified by McCormick's "Diamond" model receives none of the benefits.

With the application of water to a dry sponge in mind, the real-world cash equivalents will tend to produce one of two outcomes that help determine if the application of MAWS will be effective or ineffective. When the U.S. is involved in an operation that benefits high-level government personnel, yet provides little if any benefit to the general population, the opposite of the intended effect is achieved. Instead of pulling the population closer to the government, the population is actually pushed closer to the insurgency:

However, if money is introduced into the economy slowly and absorbed uniformly by the people, the population receives the benefits of U.S. support and will tend to gravitate closer to the government:

Finally, the rate at which money is spent during an insurgency or COIN environment has strategic implications for the enemy as well as for the supporting population at home. For example, as wasted money is used to support the insurgent and other corrupt organizations, the enemy becomes better funded and more accepted by the people. This strategic error not only emboldens the enemy, but facilitates recruiting, finances equipment procurement and increases the capacity to garner international support. As the enemy's support structures and morale improves, government support declines proportionately.

Case Study – Afghanistan

U.S. military operations in Afghanistan greatly resemble the dry sponge. Since the initial invasion in 2001, the U.S. has spent an estimated \$3 trillion fighting the Taliban, creating an effective Afghan government and building an Afghan military capable of providing protection. According to former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the U.S. is obligated to fight the Taliban in Afghanistan because of their connection to the al-Qaeda attack on the U.S. on 9/11. In fact, Secretary Clinton reminded Americans in 2009 that the U.S. mission in Afghanistan is “to disrupt, dismantle and ultimately defeat al-Qaeda and its extremist allies,” and that “to eliminate al-Qaeda, we must also fight the Taliban.” However, like water over a sponge, military resources and money must be carefully introduced into host-nation countries to avoid waste. With cost estimates in the trillions of dollars, the question remains “Is Afghanistan \$3 trillion better off?”

Of the resources being wasted in Afghanistan, arguably none is more precious than the lives of American Soldiers who are physically engaged in our fight with the Taliban. However, the incomplete understanding of the effect of outside resources on an indigenous population encouraged our strategic leaders until recently to ‘pour’ military and financial resources into the Afghan conflict with results opposite of the intended effect. Since 2009, the number of troops fighting in Afghanistan has “nearly doubled,” while injuries to troops increased by 178 percent the following year.

Unfortunately, the military effects on the Taliban may not be commensurate with the resources lost in the process. According to the Army News Service, from December 2010 to January 2011, “ISAF and Afghan forces have detained more than 100 high-value targets,” consisting of “primarily Taliban...mid- to high-level leaders” who “filled major roles in the insurgency.” However, according to reports from military personnel in other news sources, the published drawdown of U.S. forces in 2014 has given the Taliban “hidden power” consisting of networks of “spies everywhere,” and “a quasi government and the military arm that empowers it.” When the cost estimates are boiled down to simple numbers, the true cost estimate of fighting the Taliban is staggering: “the best estimate of Taliban killed per year (2,000) divided by a portion of the direct costs that the Pentagon is spending each year in Afghanistan (\$100 billion). The resulting statistic suggests that it costs \$50 million to kill each Taliban soldier.”

Despite the mixed reviews concerning the effects of increased Soldiers in Afghanistan, recent COIN history in the U.S. tends to look favorably on such surges of American troops. Although it was initially met with criticism, the troop surge of 15,000 Soldiers to Iraq in 2007 was regarded by most news sources as successful. At first glance, the surge looked to have produced two positive effects: “Violence is down, and the Iraqi forces are rapidly growing [grew] in size and ability.” However, academic review of the post-surge strategy reveals that “the recent short-term gains have come at the expense of the long-term goal of a stable, unitary Iraq.” Not surprisingly, the magic bullet of “surge warfare” has not translated well from Iraq to Afghanistan as troops continue to be ‘poured’ directly onto the Afghan sponge.

By placing more Soldiers into harm’s way in Afghanistan, it seems that, to the Taliban, the U.S. has merely provided more targets and created an opportunity for the popularity of this conflict to plummet. From a dry sponge perspective, these strategic results are expected. Not only has most of the money spent failed to be absorbed into Afghanistan’s rural villages, but the Taliban insurgency has become emboldened while domestic support for the conflict continually declines.

Conclusion

As an organization that focuses exclusively on UW, it remains in our collective best interest to continually study the strategy of COIN operations and to capitalize on lessons learned. Likewise, if we expect to be engaged in increasingly more COIN operations over time, then we must gain mastery of all the weapons required of our craft, to include the use of MAWS.

Just as an infantry squad leader is expected to use range cards and sector sketches to protect his troops in the field, we must develop additional training aides and tools that improve our Soldiers strategic understanding of the COIN environment. Additionally, the dry sponge analogy and “Diamond” model serve as simple and useful tools that help communicate our strategic vision for the employment of resources in the next conflict.

As previously mentioned in the comparison between the Allied bombing of Germany and the Battle of Britain, the strategic differences between two similar operations can produce wildly different outcomes. Although German commanders probably measured their success against Britain in terms of sorties flown, numbers of bombs dropped, casualty rates or estimated battle damage assessments, the operation nonetheless failed. The strategic failure lay not in how the operation was measured but in the intent of the operation itself. Allied air campaigns targeted industrial targets that damaged the German capacity to sustain war, while German bombs were directed at destroying the British will to fight.

When it comes to measuring the effectiveness of MAWS, similar problems are likely to surface. In a COIN environment, the only real measurement of MAWS effectiveness will be in the direction of shift of the population either toward the government or toward the insurgency. One direction is a success and the other is clearly a failure and no spending checklist or handbook can change the outcome. Like the Battle of Britain, our strategic leaders must seek to ensure that the strategic goals of our money in a COIN environment successfully make the argument that we deserve the support of the people; anything less becomes a wasteful bureaucratic exercise.

In bridging the gap between what we have done in the past and what we will do in the future, our military will be better suited to not only enhance our introduction of money into the COIN environment, but will better shape our policy makers’ opinions on the subject. By improving on our strategic fiscal policies in the future, U.S. forces will be in a better position to spend money wisely and in a manner that best shifts popular support in our favor. **SW**

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