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Warfighters, Not Missionaries

The origins of the three-block war

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Based on an excerpt from the forthcoming book, The Afghanistan Adventure: Canada's foreign policy for the 21st century by Jon Elmer and Anthony Fenton

Notwithstanding the massive historical record of brutal colonial interventions justified as "for the good of the natives," Canada's politicians and pundits wax daily about Canada's unique effort to liberate the schoolgirls of Afghanistan. This missionary rhetoric stands in stark contrast to the jargon that pervades the pronouncements of Canada's foreign policy establishment – including not only the military, but also Foreign Affairs and the Canadian International Development Agency.

The posture of the establishment's policymakers and planners betrays an aggressive, military-borne doctrine rooted in advancing Canadian "interests" on a global scale. The implementation of the "three-block war" doctrine is an illustrative example of Canada's intentions. Simply put, the three-block war is an urban warfare doctrine that identifies three separate but often simultaneous spheres of enforcing military control in a city—warfighting, policing and facilitating aid.

Canada's top soldier, General Rick Hillier, has stated that, "We have to be experts on what is called in general terms the three-block war in order to have an effect across the world." As he explained to a Senate Committee, the entire structure of the Canadian Forces (CF) is training in the three-block war "every hour of every day."

While Hillier is surely the loudest, he is not the only one discussing it. Throughout policy documents, reports and speeches, the three-block war names the operational thrust that the CF—indeed, the whole of the foreign policy establishment—are implementing for the 21st century.

The doctrine did not begin in Afghanistan (see Haiti); but, as Michael Ignatieff acknowledged during the parliamentary debate on the extension of the mission in the spring of 2006, the significance of the Afghanistan operation is that it is a test of the "paradigm shift" from



Canadian soldiers guarding prisoners in Afghanistan. ILLUSTRATION BY SYLVIA NICKERSON

"peacekeeping" to "peace enforcement."

What is the "three-block war"?

The term 'three-block war' was coined by then-head of the US Marine Corps, General Charles C. Krulak, in a revealing and instructive speech at the National Press Club in Washington in the fall of 1997. In setting the stage for the introduction of the new doctrine, Krulak drew on a lesson from imperial Rome: adapt or be defeated.

Krulak's speech was crafted around a tale of woe suffered by the mighty Roman infantry under the commander of Caesar Augustus's expeditionary forces, Publius Quintilius Varus, in 9 AD. After being roundly defeated by the under-armed militias of the indigenous Germanic tribes, Varus was said to have retreated while despondently muttering "ne cras, ne cras"—not like yesterday, not like yesterday.

"[O]ur enemies will not allow us to fight the son of Desert Storm," said Krulak, "but they will try to draw us into the stepchild of Chechnya." With this phrase, Krulak ushered in the 'fourth generation' of warfare, bidding adieu to the 'manoeuvre' warfare doctrine that defined WWII and the Cold War posture, ie. formal state militaries fighting in enormous mechanized battalions.

The Russian wars on Chechnya, particularly in the capital, Grozny, were among the bloodiest urban fights since WWII, characterized by almost total destruction of the human and physical landscape. The fighting is house to house. Gone are the frontlines and the uniforms; the battlefield is the city. The enemy is ostensibly the entire population.

And, as Krulak said to Ted Koppel on ABC's Nightline in 1999: "There is absolutely no environment more lethal than fighting building to building."

Said Krulak: "Throughout modern history, we have consciously skirted fighting in urban areas. It is a very difficult and dangerous place to fight. It is one that we want to avoid. But by 2010, over 70 per cent of the world's population will live in urban slums and in cities, most of them within 300 miles of a coastline. It is here where our enemies will challenge us. The urban areas will become the centre of gravity of our foes, and cities, as I'm sure you realize, have the potential to negate much of our technological advantage."

This, however, is the landscape of the 21st century battlefield. Barely halfway into the first decade of the century, there have already been two major wars unleashed by the US centred on the three-block model, and when Israel's wars in the West Bank and Gaza, as well as the month-long war in Lebanon in the summer of 2006 are added to the mix, the "stepchild" of Chechnya is Gaza, Jenin, Kandahar and Fallujah.

"The three-block war in microcosm"

Iraq's Fallujah is "the three-block war in microcosm," Lt. Col. Brennan Byrne told the Marine Corps Times. Byrne led Marines into Fallujah in the landmark aggression in 2004, only days after four mercenaries from the Blackwater private security firm were killed there, their charred bodies notoriously hung from a bridge.

In large swathes of Fallujah, a city of 300,000, the fighting was essentially block-by-block, backed by a massive aerial bombardment from jet fighters and helicopter gunships. Thousands were killed, more than 150,000 displaced and 50 per cent of the city's buildings, including more than 39,000 homes, were damaged or destroyed according to US officials. "Fallujah has been a return to full-up Marine Corps smash-mouth combat," Byrne said.

In a story published during the second major invasion of Fallujah in November 2004, the *Times* of London told a remarkable tale of the operative doctrine in stark relief. It is therefore worth quoting at length:

Between burnt-out apartments and minarets shot through by tank shells, a lone Iraqi man marched resolutely down Fallujah's deserted main street, a pair of white long johns held aloft on a stick instead of a white flag. Under his arm he bore a rare treasure: a boxed TV dinner with the alluring brand name in English: My Kind of Chicken. Kemal Muhammad Saleh, an unexpectedly cheerful 44-year-old man... [who] relies on handouts by the US and Iraqi forces to survive in his

devastated city... In the distance the occasional cloud of smoke rises from an incoming US artillery shell. This is what US military doctrine terms a three-block war—troops can be fighting a deadly foe in one part of town, patrolling another and rebuilding the safer areas. Colonel Mike Olivier, of the Marines civil affairs team, put the US strategy in more blunt terms. 'This is the way the Americans work: first we blow the f*** out of your house, then we pay you to rebuild it. Look at World War II, look at Najaf [Iraq]. We'll give them money, we'll give them jobs and we'll make capitalists of all of them,' he grinned.

Despite multiple massive offensives into Fallujah, the US has not been—by any measure—able to control Fallujah, or indeed, almost anywhere in the whole of Iraq. The same is true for large parts of Afghanistan. Both wars—for which victory has already been claimed—are continuing to worsen. In light of these failures, the US armed forces set about writing a counterinsurgency manual for its soldiers in order to bring the war doctrine up to speed with the operational realities in Iraq and Afghanistan. So strong was the military's avoidance of fighting insurgents or guerrillas in urban settings, that this is the first field manual on urban counterinsurgency in a generation. A final draft of the field manual—FM 3-24—was leaked in June of 2006

Marine Corp commander James Mattis—with leadership experience in southern Afghanistan and Iraq, including leading the Fallujah assault—was tapped to oversee the penning of the manual, along with army general David Petraeus. Mattis, known as "Mad Dog," is an architect of the three-block war strategy. Mattis made headlines in February 2005 when he told a public audience during a recruiting speech: "It's a lot of fun to fight 'em, it's a hell of a hoot, it's fun to shoot some people. I'll be right up front with you, I like brawlin', and one thing we have to do is make certain we're advertising, recruiting, selecting the right kind of people to go into this fight so you're not out there with people who have any misunderstanding what this is all about. You go into Afghanistan, you've got guys who slapped women around for five years 'cause they didn't wear a veil. Guys like that ain't got no manhood left anyway, so it's a helluva lot of fun to shoot 'em. It's a good fight. But as much emotional satisfaction—for all the emotional satisfaction you get from really whacking somebody like that, the main effort, ladies and gentlemen, is to diminish the conditions that drive people to sign up for these kinds of insurgencies."

In his more refined pronouncements, Mattis has been a leading figure in the transformation of the Marines, from boot camp to doctrine. His model is the three-block war; it is the urban battlefield. As Mattis said in an influential paper published in the journal of the US Naval Institute: "Look at combat in the 'contested zones' of urban and other complex terrain. We need to create the same sort of dominance we currently hold in the Global Commons to our ground forces in these contested zones."

In short, Mattis argues that if the US is to maintain its dominance in the coming era, it will have to micromanage hostile urban environments. This is reflected throughout the counterinsurgency manual, which is clear in its repeated references to the doctrine as proactive, management warfare; warfare of choice. The three-block war doctrine is a model for domination, first and foremost; it is a warfighting doctrine with the express purpose of cementing US dominance in the world for the next generation and beyond.

The counterinsurgency Field Manual is thorough and serious, and stands in sharp contrast to the political rhetoric of the War on Terror. The two hundred fifty page manual makes very little use of the term or the concept of 'terrorism', noting in the first sentence that rather than random violence, the uprisings that forces will face are "political in nature" and deeply rooted in the social fabric of what the military would euphemistically term the 'contested zone', namely: the community.

The objective is not to deal with individual threats; it is to construct doctrine to deal with wars of imposition and conquest in the new environment.

Canadian planners tend to focus attention on the two other blocks of the three-block war in order to cement the political message that they are trying to advance within the peacekeeper mythology. The goal, according to the doctrine, is to set the 'development' aspects to the tune of the combat element. A *Maclean's* embed last year described a pre-battle pep-talk in which Lt Col Ian Hope sent CF into battle by calling them Canada's "developmental warriors."

The political messaging of the Afghanistan mission centres around a "hearts and minds" campaign. Rhetorically, the three-block war doctrine is well-suited to Canada's aggressive shift.

It maintains the "peacekeeping" and "clothing refugees" missionary elements that have been so deeply entrenched in the national consciousness. Emerging as it is from the era of the peacekeeper mythology, Canadian opinion-makers would prefer this to be the face of the Canadian Forces until it can be determined that the Canadian populace is behind the warfighting component.

The corporate press has been happy to oblige. In the spring of 2006, as the fighting in Afghanistan reached the fiercest levels since 2001, *Macleans*' ran a feature under the title "Canada's Kandahar balancing act," and illustrated the piece with "the other side of Canada's rather menacing military firepower." The magazine chose a picture of Master Corporal Elizabeth Churchill cradling an Afghan baby.

The generals put more clarity to the issue. As Major-General Stuart Beare said during Senate committee testimony, Canadian Forces are "not necessarily trying to win hearts and minds here. That's a pretty tall order. You're trying to create tolerance of the international forces."

In short, says Hillier, CF must "be combat-ready and be able to conduct operations to survive. If you want to deter people from threatening your mission, you have to be seen as capable and seen as too big a bully to take on. If all those things fail and you cannot deter violence, you have to be able to fight and win. That is fundamental to everything we do."

It was precisely in articulating the three-block war doctrine during a cross-country speaking tour with Bill Graham that Rick Hillier ripped a page from General Mattis's playbook and made Canadian headlines with his comment that Canadian Forces were fighting "detestable murderers and scumbags" in Afghanistan, in defence of Canada's interests. "We're not the public service of Canada," he said. "We're not just another department. We are the Canadian Forces, and our job is to be able to kill people."

Afghanistan is not a random act of Canadian policy; it is the entire foreign policy apparatus acting on a well-articulated plan. Despite the well-crafted mythology of the peacekeeper, Canada's intervention in Afghanistan is important not because it is a departure from the past but because it is, in the words of the country's top soldier, a "glimpse of the future."

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