

Counter-Insurgency in Ferguson

BY SOFREP

The following text was published on a website of military news run by veterans, and are openly partisans of order. Despite being authored by our enemies, it offers some insight into the logic of counterinsurgency waged in Ferguson, MO during the August 2014 rebellion and in similar situations elsewhere across the country.

A few years ago I had a New Jersey cop who was deployed as a Civil Affairs soldier tell me about how police officers approach counter-insurgency differently than guys who are career soldiers. While soldiers have a propensity towards going straight towards an escalation of force, police officers are used to walking around bad neighborhoods and engaging with the locals. While this is not a rule, there is some truth to it. A soldier who has been doing nothing but Infantry training his entire career will be missing a vital piece of the Counter-Insurgency puzzle by comparison to someone else with experience as a beat cop.

The recent unrest in Ferguson, Missouri was instigated by the killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year old who was shot six times, and killed, by police officers. Whether this shooting was justified or not is unknown and it would be prudent to wait for facts to be gathered and for an investigation to conclude. However, the rioting and looting by those at least notionally outraged by the killing of Brown is also an issue that police have to deal with.

I would like to discuss the issue of Ferguson in the context of counter-insurgency and this will make a lot of people, including myself, very uncomfortable. Ferguson Police chief Tom Jackson initially mishandled the aftermath of the shooting when he held a press conference which released the name of the officer who shot Brown along with video surveillance of the suspect in an attempted robbery moments before the shooting. With Ferguson teetering on the brink, Jackson mis-managed the I/O (Information Operation) message. By releasing the name of the officer and the video

footage in tandem, Jackson appeared to imply that Brown was stopped because of the attempted robbery, a connection that Jackson has since admitted does not exist. Brown was stopped for other reasons, and many would charge that it was a case of racial profiling.

With riots and looting breaking out in Ferguson, the police also escalated the level of violence by deploying officers in riot gear and firing tear gas. Do these tactics reduce or increase antagonisms? It is a good question to ask if nothing else but sometimes options are limited for law enforcement when they are having molotov cocktails thrown at them.

The Governor of Missouri than had a stroke of genius by assigning Highway Patrol officer Ron Johnson to take the lead of this crisis. Why was this a smart decision?

Local Surrogate: Counter-Insurgency almost always involves the use of local proxy forces. Using American soldiers to fight Iraqis gives an impression of imperialism and occupation, so why not use Iraqi units that we train and lead to fight the war instead? Using white police officers to fire tear gas into crowds of black protestors (or rioters) gives a distinct impression of racial inequality and oppression. Whether these perceptions are true or not is another question, but these are perceptions which exist, and from the point of view of Counter-Insurgency, perceptions need to be managed.

Ron Johnson grew up in Ferguson, lives in an adjacent neighborhood, and is black. Combined with his 27 years as a Highway Patrol officer and his steady demeanor make him an ideal candidate as a proxy for local engagement and deescalation of violence.

Outside the Chain of Command: Being a highway patrol officer rather than a member of Ferguson Police Department places Johnson outside of the chain of command responsible for the shooting of Michael Brown. This gives Johnson some stand-off from the actions in question while allowing him to interact with both the local population and the police, including the ability to help mitigate the

conflict between the two. One of the lessons I learned in Iraq was that I was at a distinct disadvantage because of my ignorance about the local language and culture. However, I also learned that because I was not a stake holder in local conflicts, I was able to talk to all parties concerned. Shia, Sunni, Kurd, Yezidi, and others were willing to talk to you as an American even if they were not willing to talk to each other. This can put you in a position as a mediator, and with a little luck, a peacemaker.

Hearts and Minds: Johnson loosened restrictions placed upon the protestors and ordered police officers to stow away the gas masks. He also descended into groups of protestors by himself to shake hands and hear the grievances which people had. This allowed the protestors to see the human face of the police force. Rather than a Army of faceless riot police, they were confronted with a man who was willing at least try to help. Counter-Insurgency is about breaking down the walls between the soldier and the civilian. The insurgent de-institutionalizes violence, which also breaks down the wall between military/police targets and civilian targets. Countering the insurgent means adapting, and even partially acquiescing to them. Once you are inside the insurgent's decision making cycle, you slowly adjust attitudes and manage perceptions. These tactics have been at least partially effective in disarming the violent aspect of the protests in Ferguson.

Whether these tactics and techniques are ultimately effective at quelling the civil unrest in Ferguson remains to be seen. However, the other question at stake here is addressing the root causes of the insurgency itself. This would involve a strategy and not just a series of tactics. How do you address the issues of poverty, racial inequality, and the long standing antagonisms between many black communities and the policemen assigned to enforce the law in their neighborhood? These are challenging questions and the answers will involve painful compromises.