



Building Rapport

The History and Near Future of Combat Advising

By 1st Lt. Dominick Healey

Throughout history, Combat Advisors have played a major role in the advancement of national interests. Since the burgeoning of advanced human civilizations, warriors have been set to the purpose of multiplying force by establishing rapport and enabling allies to defend frontiers. Combat Advisors provide the essential function of multiplying influence and combat power, without committing large amounts of men to a pitched conflict. In Europe and the Middle East, Ancient Roman frontier borders were buffered by equipping and advising local auxiliary forces. In Asia, Sun Tzu proselytized that neutrals and wavering enemy agents must be engaged to tip the balance in conflicts: “bribe them to serve you. Give them instructions and care for them.” America’s Continental Army was trained by Europeans like the Marquis de Lafayette, who sought to indirectly advance French national interests against the British Empire. Historical near-equivalents of the modern American Combat Advisor and his/her mission have existed as long as war itself. These advisors have operated on frontiers and beyond borders to strengthen relationships and provide proxy defenses to confront hard-to-reach threats. A common component of each of these historical examples is their cost efficiency when compared to achieving the same means by conventional force.

In a drawdown environment, we must learn to defeat our enemies with increasingly limited resources. The Army’s Operating Concept calls for near-term adaptation to address, “new needs or changes without a loss of functionality.” This concept calls for the Army to, “integrate the efforts of others and project national power.” So, how do we adapt our current model to confront our enemies with new resource limitations? The United States Army is a powerful, technologically superior force with a consistent record of winning its battles. At face value, these are positive qualities. However, allowing these qualities to exclusively guide our Army’s future direction would be a fatal mistake. Technology forms dependent behaviors, wealth breeds reliance on expensive luxuries, and victory justifies arrogance. Maj. Tim Karcher explains this phenomenon in, “Understanding the ‘Victory Disease,’ From the Little Bighorn to Mogadishu and Beyond.”¹ The Victory Disease a set of behaviors defined by complacency, misperceived invincibility, and pattern-oriented thinking. The military is drawing down its active component after fifteen costly years of war. Concurrently, the nation is facing a plethora of localized and dedicated threats across the planet. At present, we simply cannot confront each of those worldwide threats with conventional force. Armies cost money to train, equip, transport, and support; armed interventions cost political capital. We cannot afford to fall into the patterned complacency of the Victory Disease during a time when the Army is being asked to do more with less.

The initial victory of any terrorist organization is coercing the United States into paying the high cost necessary to confront it. These localized terrorist threats are arising in multitudes, and in geopolitically isolated areas, which further aggravates the costs of confronting them. When faced with a similar issue of ubiquitous barbarian incursions on their frontiers, Rome devised a less costly alternative to dispatching its legions. Rather than sending full legions from the Italian Peninsula to extinguish minor frontier conflicts, Rome often sent diplomatic agents and para-military support to bribe, recruit, and train local non-citizens. This was framed as a symbiotic effort: fight for Rome and you will receive autonomy, training, protection, and resources. The effort was not solely military either. Embedded in Rome’s offer was the promise of Roman citizenship, Roman amenities, and Roman culture. While the Roman method was more culturally imposing than our own, the ultimate intent was the same: Reduce remote force requirements by motivating an appropriate third party to fight the conflict for us.

In 2016, the American Nation finds itself in a similar situation. Like Rome, the United States must



reinvest its military resources into a more efficient means of defending our non-linear frontiers. Our exit strategy is to empower third parties to defeat our mutual enemies. At its core, this is the mission of the Combat Advisor and Security Force Assistance (SFA). Combat Advisors deploy in small contingents with a partially military and partially diplomatic mission. In one sense, the Combat Advisor strengthens alliances by building rapport and establishing relationships. In another sense, the Combat Advisor extends American power by giving third parties the means to improve their military capabilities. The ultimate intent is that the third party defeats or contains our shared threats.

Our key focus in the next decade needs to be the empowerment of legitimate authorities in opposition to hostile organizations worldwide. This empowerment must involve material aid, diplomatic efforts, and commitment. The chief contribution of the Army to this combined effort is the Combat Advisor. Our enemies are too localized, numerous, and geographically isolated to be completely defeated with conventional power. We must assist third parties in confronting these threats with their own forces. We must reestablish rapport with alienated allied nations, many of whom have grown less fond of American friendship in a post-Soviet world. We must stop blindly reacting to emerged threats, and empower third parties to confront local terrorist threats before they become terrorist states. Terrorism must be destroyed worldwide at its roots, and Combat Advisors are our best hope for enabling legitimate authorities worldwide to accomplish this mission.

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NOTES

1. Major Timothy Karcher, "Understanding the "Victory Disease," From the Little Bighorn to Mogadishu and Beyond," Global War on Terrorism Occasional Paper 3 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2004).