

Leadership in Counterinsurgency: A Tale of Two Leaders

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CGSC 06-002

SG 03B

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“This man is different from the rest of the Englishmen whom we have seen so far, that he listens attentively to the political organization of the Arabs and...his questions show a depth in the subject which is not present except with one who has in it a pleasure and a passion.”¹

Dr. Sahbander on meeting T.E. Lawrence

“The answer lies not in pouring more troops into the jungle, but in the hearts and minds of the people.” – General Sir Gerald Templer, Malaya, 1952

The importance of military leadership remains constant in peacetime, war or a counterinsurgency operation. To develop better leaders for the current counterinsurgency fight, let us look back at two highly successful leaders of the past. T.E. Lawrence, always a controversial figure, lived the life of an insurgent, and in essence, became the model advisor for the Arab forces fighting the Turkish Army. General Sir Gerald Templer possessed the ideal leadership qualities necessary to defeat an insurgency and shifted the balance of power in favor of the British during the Malaya Emergency. Together, the two figures could not be more opposite. Lawrence was the eccentric misfit and Templer the essence of a proper British officer. Both, however, possessed a timeless trait our current leaders need today to win in a counterinsurgency environment, bold leadership. Let us evaluate the qualities of these two leaders using the Army framework of Be, Know, Do found in FM 22-100, Army Leadership.

FM 22-100 describes the key characteristics needed by a U.S. Army leader as Be, Know and Do. “Be” represents the leader’s character, their inner strength. Character, demonstrated through behavior, helps build physical courage and the moral courage to make difficult

¹ John E. Mack *Prince of our Disorder: The Life of T.E. Lawrence* (Boston: First Harvard University Press, 1998).

decisions.² “Know” involves interpersonal skills, conceptual skills, technical and tactical skills. A leader masters all of these skills to build a team, develop a unit’s weaknesses and enhance a unit’s strengths. The “do” of leadership characteristics includes influencing people, operating the systems of an organization and improving an organization’s capabilities.³ Both T.E. Lawrence and General Templer both possessed these necessary qualities of “Be, Know and Do” resulting in their successful leadership roles as both an insurgent and counterinsurgent leader.

T.E. Lawrence stirs up a variety of emotions today. His seminal work, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* brought him into the spotlight from which he struggled to escape later in life. Painting a vivid picture of desert warfare, life with the Arab tribes and his role as an insurgent advisor, Lawrence’s works remain important to military officers today. Looking at his leadership actions as part of an insurgency grants valuable access for the counterinsurgency student. Lawrence provides a clear picture of the troubles, motivations and strengths of an Arab insurgency along with challenges faced by a military advisor.

Somewhat of a misfit in uniform, Lawrence had some limited military training while in college but little other formal officer training.⁴ However, he read and understood military theorists, both classic and those of his time. Lawrence often quoted Clausewitz and Joffre in his writings, along with Thucydides and other ancient writers. His lack of extensive officer training, however, proved a benefit. Lawrence held none of the presumptions or formalized procedures of a normal British officer. Instead, Lawrence pulled from his own understanding of Arab culture, learned not through books or classes but from life experience. Developing a passion for archeology in college, Lawrence chose to spend years conducting research on crusader fortifications throughout the Middle

² FM 22-100, *Army Leadership: Be, Know, Do* Headquarters, Department of the Army, Washington D.C., 31 August 1999.

³ Ibid, page 1-7.

⁴ Michael Yardley *T.E. Lawrence: A Biography* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000).

East in the early 1900s.⁵ Lawrence's love for the desert began immediately, along with his desire to blend into the Arab culture. He would often spend weeks alone walking from region to region dressed as an Arab while absorbing their culture. His understanding of the culture, ability to speak Arabic and his knowledge of the terrain eventually won him a commission as an intelligence officer in Cairo when the First World War started. His odd behaviors, lack of military discipline and fondness for Arab culture, however, frustrated his superiors. His assignment as a liaison officer to the Arab revolt was primarily to get him out of the headquarters and to harness his unique understanding of Arab culture vaguely understood by other British officers. What his superiors failed to recognize, was his natural leadership qualities combined with his complete understanding of the Arab's history and mindset.

Lawrence quickly took to the situation of the Arab revolt when he met with Prince Faisal in the Arabian Desert. After meeting with Prince Faisal, Lawrence immediately volunteered his services. Lawrence's tasks were to develop an assessment of the Arab capabilities and the chances of the revolt's success. Lawrence, however, had the moral courage to go a few steps further. After rendering his assessment to the British military, Lawrence returned to Prince Faisal's camp and became, in essence, an insurgent.⁶ While living and working with the Arab insurgency, Lawrence gained a better understanding of their capabilities. The Arab weaknesses included the lack of a unified effort and modern military equipment. Fragmented among tribal bloodlines, there was no clear unifying identity as an "Arab" among the insurgents. Tribal lines were as important in Lawrence's time as they are today, perhaps even more so. Additionally, the Arab fighters were

⁵ Ibid, 41.

⁶ Ibid, 86.

poorly armed. Lacking modern rifles, machine guns, or artillery, the insurgents could not fight the Turkish army head to head. This, however, played into the insurgent's strengths, quickly recognized and exploited by Lawrence. The Arab's strengths were mobility and the ability to conduct hit and run raids. Camel riding skills and the heartiness of the Arab fighters made for highly mobile insurgents, limited only by the amount of flour carried and the location of watering holes. Lawrence also identified the Turks lived in fixed fortifications (such as Medina) and established bases supplied by tenuous lines of communications. Their supply lines relied almost entirely on railroads across the vast, open desert. Armed with this knowledge, Lawrence utilized his interpersonal skills and clear understanding of the Arab culture to build alliances within the tribes. Lawrence planned to harass the Turkish supply lines and leave the larger fixed forces to wither away in their bases. Medina alone held over 12,000 Turkish troops.⁷ Rather than use conventional tactics against a superior force, Lawrence advised the Arabs to fight a more traditional insurgent fight. As more tribes joined the revolt, Lawrence continued to develop his technical and tactical skills to lead his insurgents. He eventually devised a daring plan to seize the port city of Akaba with the Arab insurgents. Akaba offered a port to supply for the Arabs along with an easier line of communication back to the British military. Lawrence envisioned Akaba as a stepping-stone for the Arab's eventual drive to Damascus. Lawrence also knew the insurgency needed modern weapons, logistics and especially money to continue. Akaba provided that logistical link back to the British military so necessary to continue the revolt. Akaba, however, was well protected from any sea assault by strong coastal defenses. These defenses prevented any British naval or amphibious assistance if Akaba were assaulted. Lawrence planned

⁷ Ibid, 96.

and led a bold march over 600 miles of open desert; capturing Akaba from the lightly defended east with a small party of Arab insurgents and stunning the British military command in Cairo.⁸ Lawrence continually demonstrated his personal courage day after day while leading the insurgents. Lawrence received technical training from the Royal Navy on demolitions. He eventually became an accomplished train bomber, planting explosives along the tracks while his insurgent force waited in ambush. Lawrence and his insurgents wrecked dozens of Turkish supply trains severely hampering the logistical situation at the fixed bases. Lawrence possessed a gifted understanding of the Arab insurgent strengths,

“We could develop a highly mobile, highly equipped striking force of the smallest size, and use it successively at distributed points of the Turkish line, to make them strengthen their posts beyond the defensive minimum of twenty men. This would be a short cut to success.”⁹

As an insurgent leader, Lawrence lived by the current U.S. Army leadership model of be, know and do. His interpersonal skills appeared sharper when among the Arabs over those of his own military. He understood the capabilities of the Arab insurgent organization, their strengths and weaknesses. He continually organized (and reorganized) tenuous alliances between tribes, maintaining a delicate balance within the Arab coalition to keep the insurgency active. He used British military links to improve the quality of equipment and logistics for his insurgents. His personal courage to disappear within the Arab ranks is unmatched even today. Often maligned by history, there is little doubt Lawrence demonstrated true leadership in the Arab revolt. His

⁸ T.E. Lawrence *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1935).

⁹ Ibid, 224.

actions not only assisted the British in gaining a victory against the Turkish Army, they also started the notion of Arab states ruled by Arabs. His leadership, courage and organizational skills continue to serve as an example for leaders in an insurgent environment. During the Second World War, the British Army issued copies of Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* to resistance commanders as the textbook on irregular warfare.¹⁰ Still considered by many as the perfect example of what a military advisor should be, T.E. Lawrence's leadership was instrumental in the successful Arab revolt.

General Sir Gerald Templer entered the Malaya Emergency when the communist insurgency was at its high point. In June 1948, the Malayan Communist Party initiated an insurgency against the British and Malaya government in the Malaya Emergency. The insurgents were primarily ethnic Chinese looking to conduct a Mao type revolution to bring about a communist run state. Malaya, however, was different from the China Mao took over. Occupied by the British since 1791, the majority of the Malaysians had no desire for communism. Additionally, a majority of the economic inflow to Malaya stemmed from British run rubber plantations and tin mines. Culturally, a desire for communism only ran within the minority ethnic Chinese population of Malaya. However, through 1951, the British has little success in stemming the communist insurgency.

In February 1952, Templer arrived in Malaya as the new High Commissioner. Up until that point, the insurgents held the advantage. The British military and Malayan security forces had not stopped the insurgent violence. 1951 marked the most violent year in the ongoing insurgency. In fact, the former High Commissioner Sir Henry Gurney

¹⁰ Yardley, 99.

died in a communist ambush on 6 October 1951, clearly indicating the poor security situation in Malaya.¹¹ While the insurgents no longer made major gains in Malaya, the British government efforts did little to roll back the insurgent tide. Templer faced an extremely difficult situation upon his arrival in Malaya. There was a complete lack of cultural understanding within the Malaya security forces, the British Army and the treatment of insurgents. Templer, however, wasted little time getting to work.

A former commander of the 56th and 6th Armored Divisions during World War Two, Templer had extensive traditional military experience. He additionally served as the military governor in the British zone of occupied Germany after the war, equipping him with a working knowledge of military governance. Once on the ground in Malaya, Templer took a three-week tour of the country to gage the situation. Immediately upon his return, he reorganized his headquarters to better address the insurgency. His headquarters moved away from the traditional war-fighting role used since 1948, instead focusing on civil relief, social changes, economic stability and small unit operations. Templer focused on securing the police posts around the country and on capturing or turning, not killing, insurgents. Templer wanted surrendered insurgents working for him to undermine their former comrades. Media and propaganda reports often used statements from the former communist insurgents encouraging their peers to surrender. Psychological warfare sections, consisting of no more than thirty members and consisting of mostly Chinese ex-insurgents known as psywar groups, broadcast surrender policies. Rather than kill insurgents, Templer believed a well-executed surrender policy also provided the best possible intelligence on the organization, morale and weaknesses of the

¹¹ Noel Barber *War of the Running Dogs* (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1971).

insurgency.¹² Radio broadcasts, Chinese language newspapers, government films, pamphlets and personal appearances of surrendered enemy personnel in villages all aided the British counterinsurgency campaign.

Templer made important changes to the military efforts as well. Patrol reports became mandatory. An operational research team went through all the raw data, analyzed it and distributed lessons learned back to the troops in the field. Rather than continue the fruitless battalion-sized jungle sweeps conducted for the first three years of the insurgency, Templer emphasized deep jungle patrolling by small, well-trained units to gather vital intelligence on the insurgents. Jungle training schools taught small unit tactics and effective methods for fighting insurgents to both army and police units. Doctrine also developed rapidly. Based on lessons learned at the Jungle Training School, a small book known as “The Conduct of Anti-Terrorist Operations in Malaya”, or ATOM, was printed and sized to fit in the pockets of every soldier’s jungle uniform. Every six months soldiers received an updated and revised edition capturing the latest intelligence and lessons learned.¹³ The Malayan police forces also received this valuable document along with attending the same army schools to develop proficiency in fighting an insurgent force. Templer knew integration of all security forces was an important step towards a stable future for Malaya.

Templer wisely focused on winning over the ethnic Chinese civilians within Malaya, the insurgent support base. Public work projects in the ethnic Chinese areas, along with civic training prepared the local leaders to eventually take over an independent Malayan government. These actions provided huge incentives to the

¹² Ibid, 93.

¹³ Ibid, 97.

civilians to either turn away or turn in insurgents. Templer accelerated the relocation of entire Chinese squatter villages first implemented under the Briggs Plan.¹⁴ The British built brand new towns complete with schools, medical facilities and designated plots of land for the Chinese squatters. Entire villages located on the fringes of the jungles eventually relocated to these new camps under British protection and control. A civic government run by the ethnic Chinese within the villages prepared the population for an eventual merger into mainstream Malaya society. Additionally, each family received a land title for their farmland. This was the first time a majority of ethnic Chinese had hereditary titles passable from father to son guaranteeing family land ownership. These new villages took away the vital insurgent support base and started to integrate ethnic Chinese into mainstream Malaya society breaking down cultural walls.

Templer, through his personal actions and clear understanding of the cultural problems behind the insurgency, quickly developed effective methods to win back the population. For an officer raised in mostly traditional military positions, Templer developed his inner strength and courage over years of service. However, Templer's ability to influence, operate and improve an organization, the "do" aspect of leadership, is what sets him apart as a counter-insurgent leader. Despite his career of traditional military assignments, Templer quickly grasped the key to defeating the Malayan insurgency was not through military action, but by winning over the Chinese population through social changes, security and setting the conditions to grant eventual independence to the Malaya people. Templer understood the problems facing his organization from the first day he took command. Every one of his efforts focused on improving his organization's ability to understand the insurgent problem, its solutions

¹⁴ Ibid, 97.

and working towards achieving those solutions. Templer possessed the technical and tactical skills, not only from a military perspective, but as a military government expert as well. His ability to take traditional military organizational skills and apply them towards defeating an insurgency demonstrated his organizational leadership abilities. The lessons from Templer's military governance clearly applied to the initial roles of U.S. military commanders at the end of Operation Iraqi Freedom hostilities. Again, military commanders shed their traditional roles of warriors and took on the "mask of governance". In our current counterinsurgent fight, U.S. senior leaders continue to demonstrate similar techniques used successfully by General Templer. The actions of then Major General Petraeus in Mosul are a classic example of a military leader focusing on social, economic and cultural lines of operation along with a more traditional military role countering an insurgency.

Leadership remains as the most important factor in any military operation, be it conventional combat or a counterinsurgency campaign. The traditional education, training and planning abilities of military officers provide a firm foundation to build counterinsurgency skills. A leader's responsibility to be, know and do, however, never changes regardless of the environment. Both T.E. Lawrence and General Sir Templer demonstrated different, yet important, types of leadership in two completely different insurgent environments. Lawrence successfully integrated himself within an Arab insurgency, leading a scattered band of tribes into a formidable force. Templer took over a difficult command as both the military and civilian leader of Malaya and ripped away control of the country from the insurgents by winning over the population. Both soldiers demonstrated the absolute need for strong leadership, regardless of the situation. The

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U.S. military has the finest soldiers, equipment and training in the world. What truly sets our military apart from others are the leaders, both officer and NCO. Together, the officers and NCOs provide the leadership, planning expertise and experience to overcome any obstacles and to succeed in any environment. In a counterinsurgency fight, the key to winning has always been and will always be leadership.

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