

# THREE-BLOCK WAR

## A Critical Analysis

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# Origins

General Charles Krulak  
Marine Corps Commandant  
(1995-99)



*“We are faced with a world in transition. Seemingly overnight, once stable nation states are imploding, ripped by internal struggle, confronted by long suppressed animosities...*

*“To fight and win the three-block war will demand men and women who are not only experts in their craft, but uncompromising in judgment and character. We, therefore developed the cradle to grave process we call transformation.”*

— National Press Club, Washington, DC, 10 October 1997

“In one moment in time, our service members will be feeding and clothing displaced refugees, providing *humanitarian* assistance.

In the next moment, they will be holding two warring tribes apart -- conducting *peacekeeping* operations -- and, finally, they will be fighting a highly lethal mid-intensity *battle* -- all on the same day ... all within three city blocks. It will be what we call the ‘three block war’.”



**Gen. Charles Krulak**

address to the National Press Club, Washington D.C.

10 October 1997 (emphasis added)

# *Marines Magazine*

“The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War”

## Somalia-like Scenario

- ‘Corporal Hernandez’ provides security to Int. Relief Org (IRO)
- Militia leaders ‘Nedeed and Mubasa’ fighting
- RPG downs helicopter

“The Corps has described such amorphous conflicts as – the three block war – contingencies in which marines may be confronted by the entire spectrum of *tactical* challenges in the space of a few hours and within the space of three continuous city blocks.”

– Gen. Charles C. Krulak, “The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War”,  
*Marines Magazine*, January 1999. [emphasis added]

# General Krulak's Concept

- ✦ Marine Corps' environment, roles & capabilities
  - ◆ Littoral regions
  - ◆ Urban warfare future
  - ◆ Somalia-like situations
- ✦ Worst-case tactical scenario
- ✦ National approach
  - ◆ Primacy of combat
- ✦ Superpower's role



Helicopter over Mogadishu on 3 October 1993.



# 3BW in the US Military

- ✦ Never became part of US doctrine
  - ◆ Including Marine Corps
- ✦ Mainly referred to by Marine Corps
  - ◆ Marine Corp Warfighting Laboratory
  - ◆ General James Mattis: “Hybrid War” (2005)
    - Add block for “psychological or info operations”
  - ◆ Col. John Boggs: “within three blocks, they expect to act as diplomats, soldiers, and policemen.” (2004)



Col. John Agolia

Director, US Army Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute

- Adds ‘Stabilization and reconstruction’ line of operation
- Three Block War was not meant to be a concept for strategic direction.

# 3BW Comes to Canada

## General Rick Hillier

- ◆ Deputy Commander, III Corps, Ft Hood (1998-00)
- ◆ Chief of Land Staff (2003-05)
- ◆ Chief of Defence Staff (2005-)



The three block war concept will “significantly alter how we structure, how we prepare, how we command, how we train, how we operate and how we sustain ourselves.”

— Chief of Defence Staff General Rick Hillier, 2005

# Canadian Interpretation

- ✱ US Marines → Cdn Army → Cdn military
- ✱ 3 City Blocks → 3 tasks/missions
- ✱ Tactical description → Strategic direction
  - ◆ Central operating concept

**"Preparing our soldiers for the three-block war will be the foundation of all our training. Leaders at all levels must ensure that our soldiers are set up for success in all aspects of the three-block war."**

**- Commander of the Army**



# Canadian Adoption: CLS/CDS Rick Hillier

“It all comes down to the three block war. You are fighting in *Block One*, while simultaneously helping secure, stabilize and nation-build in *Block Two*, and all the while, you are also helping people through disaster relief, humanitarian assistance and peacekeeping in *Block Three*.”

“The important part is that you are doing all three simultaneously using complex training in the centres of population.”

“We have not put sufficient intellectual energy, and resources, and work toward the other two blocks specifically, and then all three blocks together.”

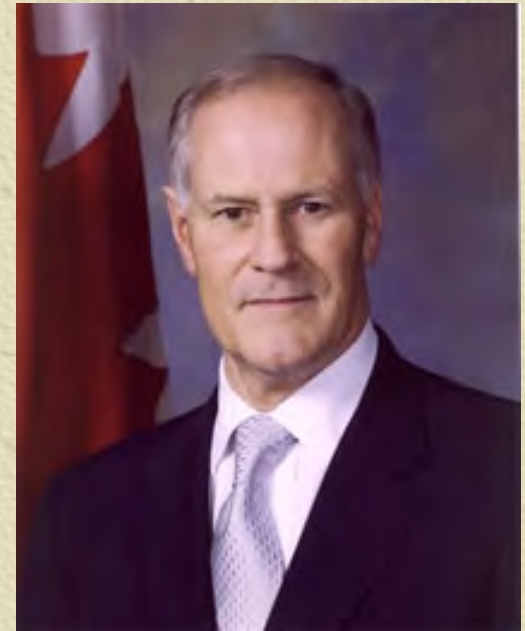
- LGen. Rick Hillier, Quoted by Chris Maclean, “Experience is Shaping Army Transformation; Interview with Lieutenant-General Rick Hillier”, Frontline, Jan/Feb 2005, [http://www.frontline-canada.com/Defence/pdfs/0201Hillier\\_CLS.pdf](http://www.frontline-canada.com/Defence/pdfs/0201Hillier_CLS.pdf)



# Politicians come on board (cautiously)

“Collectively, the military calls these efforts ‘peace support operations.’

“*Some military analysts* have also referred to it as a ‘three block war’ in order to fully capture the overlapping missions that modern *peacekeepers* must be prepared to undertake at any one time.”



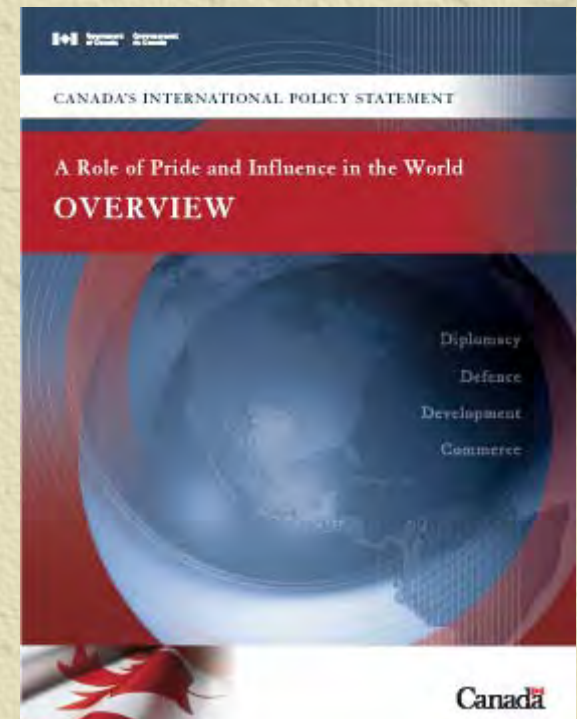
– Honourable Bill Graham, Minister of National Defence,  
Annual Conference of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada, Montreal  
18 February 2005 (emphasis added)

# International Policy Statement (IPS) Overview

“The image that captures today’s operational environment for the Canadian Forces is a ‘three-block-war.’ Increasingly, there is **overlap** in the tasks our personnel are asked to carry out at any one time.

Our military *could be* engaged in *combat* against well-armed militia in one city block, *stabilization* operations in the next block, and *humanitarian* relief and reconstruction two blocks over.

Transition from one type of task to the other can happen in the blink of an eye. This ability of the Canadian Forces to wage three-block wars has been amply demonstrated in diverse theatres from *Bosnia to Afghanistan.*”



(emphasis added)

# ARMY TRANSFORMATION

## THREE-BLOCK WAR

Within the same mission, we will engage in a high-intensity fight against the armies of failing states, conduct stabilization or peace support operations including counter-insurgency and deliver humanitarian aid or assist others doing it (three-block war)



Combat



Stability

"Preparing our soldiers for the three-block war will be the foundation of all our training. Leaders at all levels must ensure that our soldiers are set up for success in all aspects of the three-block war."

- Commander of the Army



Humanitarian



***Project power into  
population centres***

Block One

High Intensity  
Combat  
Operations against  
Armed Forces of  
Failing and Failed  
States



Block Two

Stability Operations  
including  
Counterinsurgency



***Simultaneous***

Block Three

Humanitarian  
Assistance including  
Reconstruction



# Combat




# Stability



# Humanitarian







**Within the same mission, we will engage  
in a high-intensity fight against the armies  
of failing states, conduct stabilization or  
peace support operations including  
counter-insurgency and deliver  
humanitarian aid or assist others doing it  
(three-block war)**

# Preliminary Problems

✦ “Mid-intensity” to “high intensity”

➔ Definition of “mid”/“high”

✦ “Blocks”

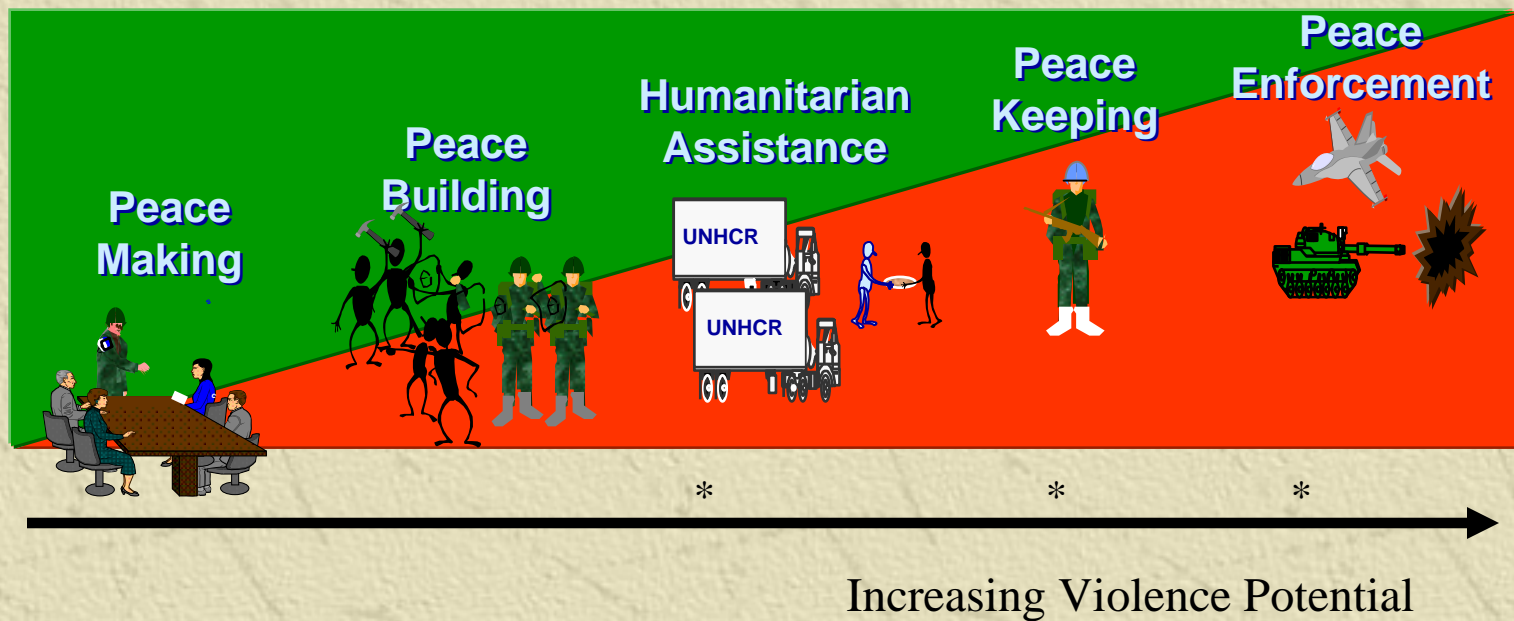
◆ City blocks (urban warfare)?

◆ Other environments?

◆ What mission types?

➔ All

# PSO Types (NATO doctrine)



+ Conflict prevention

Source: adapted from PSTC, EO 401.02



# How Many Blocks / Mission Types?

## PSO (NATO)

- ✦ Peacemaking
- ✦ Peacebuilding
- ✦ Humanitarian relief
- ✦ Peacekeeping
- ✦ Peace Enforcement
- ✦ Conflict Prevention

## 3BW

- ✦ Humanitarian
- ✦ Stability/peacekeeping
- ✦ Combat

## 3D+C (“Whole of Government”)

Diplomacy,  
Development, Commerce  
Defence

# Preliminary Problems (cont'd)

## ✦ Ambiguities

CDS Seminar Hotwash, 18 February 2005:

- ◆ “Uncertainty with regards to detail of operational concept (three block war)”
- ◆ “Ambiguity in ... the implications of 3BW for all CF environments”

## ✦ Lack of a primary (keystone) document

- ◆ A few PPT bullets, a few lines in speeches, Army poster
- ◆ Differing interpretations
  - Fight against whom?
  - Combat or stability-centred?

Within the same mission, we will engage in a high-intensity fight against the armies of failing states, conduct stabilization or peace support operations including

## ✦ Lack of in-depth analysis

- ◆ Pros and cons; Case studies

→ Prepare these

# Critical Analysis



✦ Pros

✦ Cons

✦ Cases

✦ Conclusions




# Pros

## ✦ Simple conceptualization

- ◆ “Beauty in simplicity”
- ◆ “NCM appeal”

## ✦ Begins to convey the multidimensional nature of modern international military missions

- ◆ *Potential tactical situations* in tough missions
- ◆ Afghanistan example
  - Model fits the case *or* case fits model?



## ✦ Highlights need for expanded skills

- Larger toolkit
- Adaptable
- Complex thinking
- General Hillier: “The vast majority of our command support work has previously all been focussed on block one, and now we have to take into account the complexities of blocks one, two and three – all done simultaneously.”



# Major Cons

## 1) TOO SIMPLE

- Maybe > 3 three lines of operation/activities
  - NATO: several types
- One size fits all? “Operations are operations”

## 2) LACK OF MISSION CLARITY

- Danger of “mixing mandates”
  - Confusion
    - ◆ Fight war or keep peace?
    - ◆ Looses distinction between operation types
  - Compare with US doctrine: War or MOOTW
  - Define success in 3BW?

### 3) LACKS WIDER ACCEPTANCE

- ✠ Buy-in from other CF elements?
  - Army (ground)-centric
  - “Equally applicable to air and naval assets”, MGen Leslie in *CMJ*
  - Joint & integrated strategy
  
- ✠ Not adopted by DFAIT or CIDA
  - Not referred to in IPS Diplomacy or Development Stmts
  - For military circles
  
- ✠ Not accepted by the population at large
  - Never become a household expression
  - “Warfighting” mandate requires special consideration
  - For military circles
  
- ✠ Not used by other militaries
  - CF usage

## 4) IMPOSES EMPHASIS ON WARFIGHTING (3B “War”)

- ◆ Reinforces pre-disposition to offensive operations
  - Lessons of Somalia
  - offensive vs defensive?
- ◆ Enemy-mentality predominates (war/peace blurred)
- ◆ Danger of self-fulfilling prophesy
  - Making enemies
  - Unnecessary collateral damage
- ◆ Mission creep easier
- ◆ War or peace as the end-state?
  - Loose sight of goal: sustainable peace
  - Stability is superficial (e.g., Haiti)
  - Peace is deeper
  - “Why is it called war”

Within the same mission, we will engage in a high-intensity fight against the armies of failing states, conduct stabilization or peace support operations including

# OOTW/War in the Spectrum of Conflict



*Canadian Forces Operations, Figure 1-1.*

B-GG-005-004/AF-000. 2000-12-18

Also in <http://www.army.forces.gc.ca/acl/pubs/300-009/b-gl-394/002/fp-001/B-GL-394-002-FP-001.pdf>

# The Public Mind

✠ War entered into only *in extremis*

- ◆ Needs special consideration
- ◆ Routine 3B War unacceptable

✠ “Peacekeeping” won’t disappear

- ◆ Fundamental peacekeeping principles (the trinity)
  - Consent for deployment
  - Impartiality
  - Minimum use of force



# Cases

# CASE: IRAQ

Three Block War?

# Three Block War

U.S. Marines in Iraq



**MATT ZEIGLER**



# Iraq

✦ Goal: a stable, democratic, peaceful country

✦ Three +++ Block War:

- ◆ Combat / stabilization-peacekeeping / reconstruction
- ◆ Unworkable?

✦ Over-estimated ease post-invasion

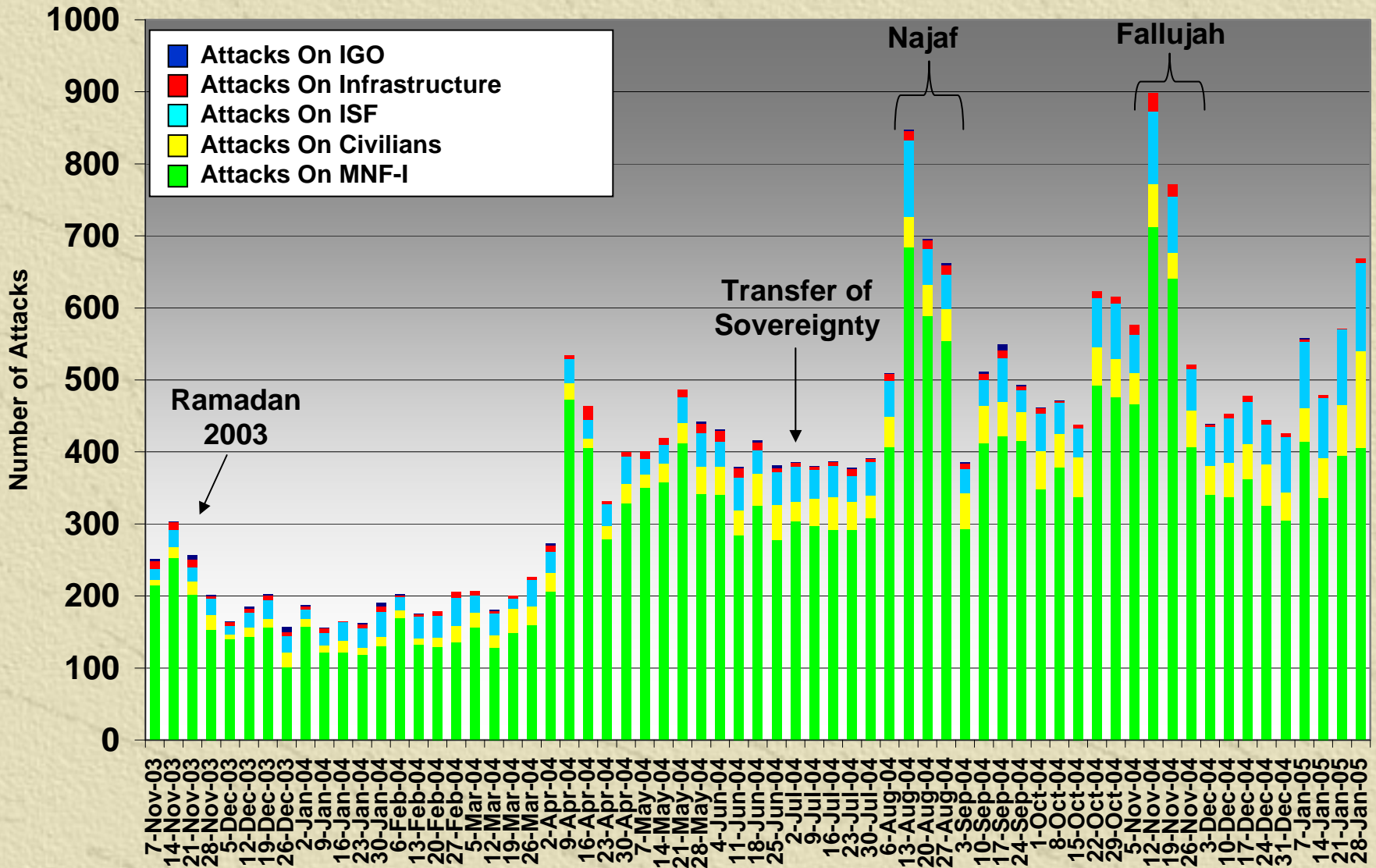
✦ Marine Gen (ret'd) Joseph Hoar, former head US Central Command:

"The utility of going house-to-house in an environment like this is very questionable. There is no way you can create a peaceful environment by shooting at people."

No military solution; only a political one that may not be helped by aggressive military action.

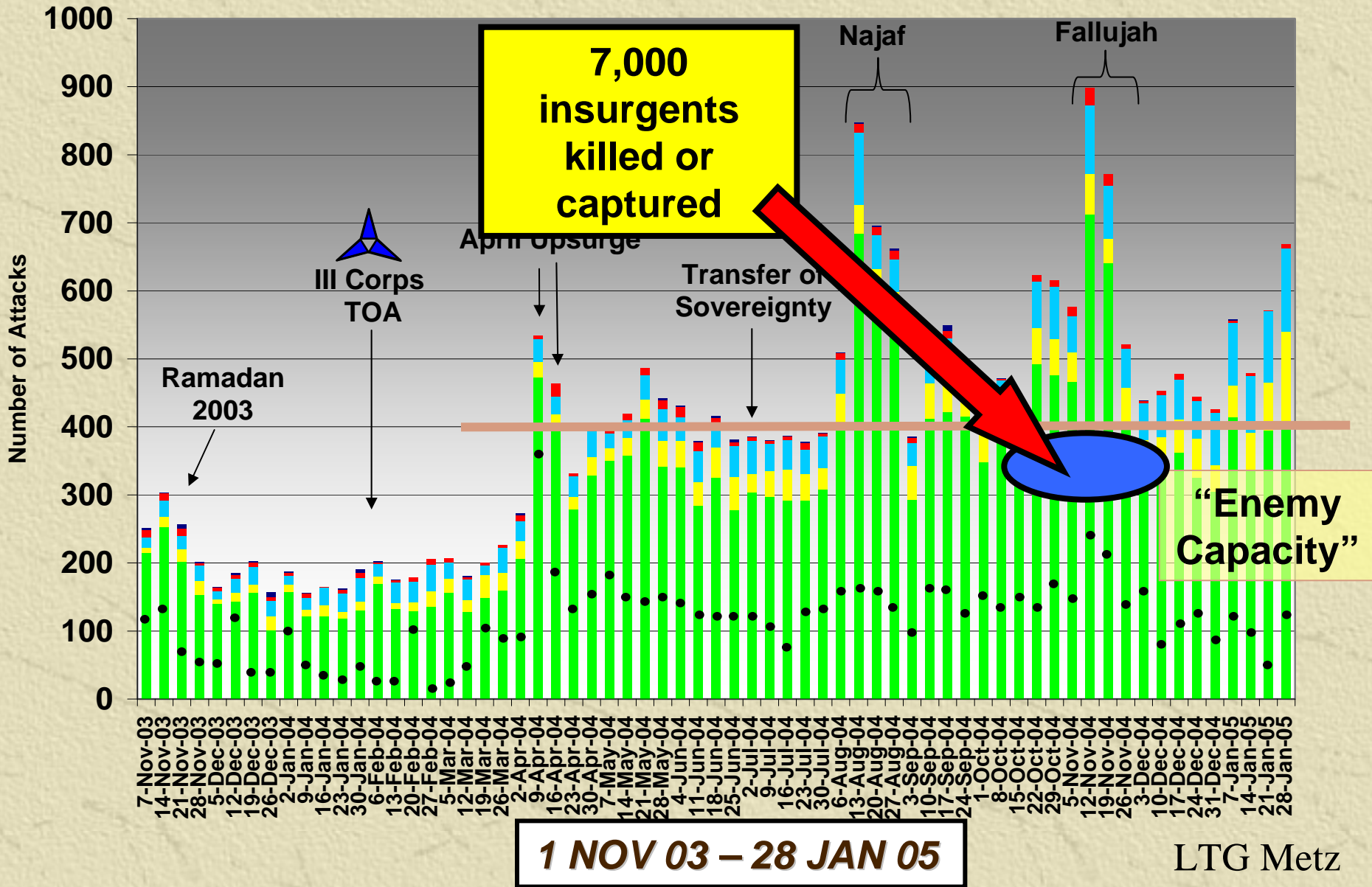
– “Marines surprised in fight for Falluja”, Peter Spiegel, *Financial Times*, London (UK), Apr 16, 2004, p. 15.

# Test: Attack Trends

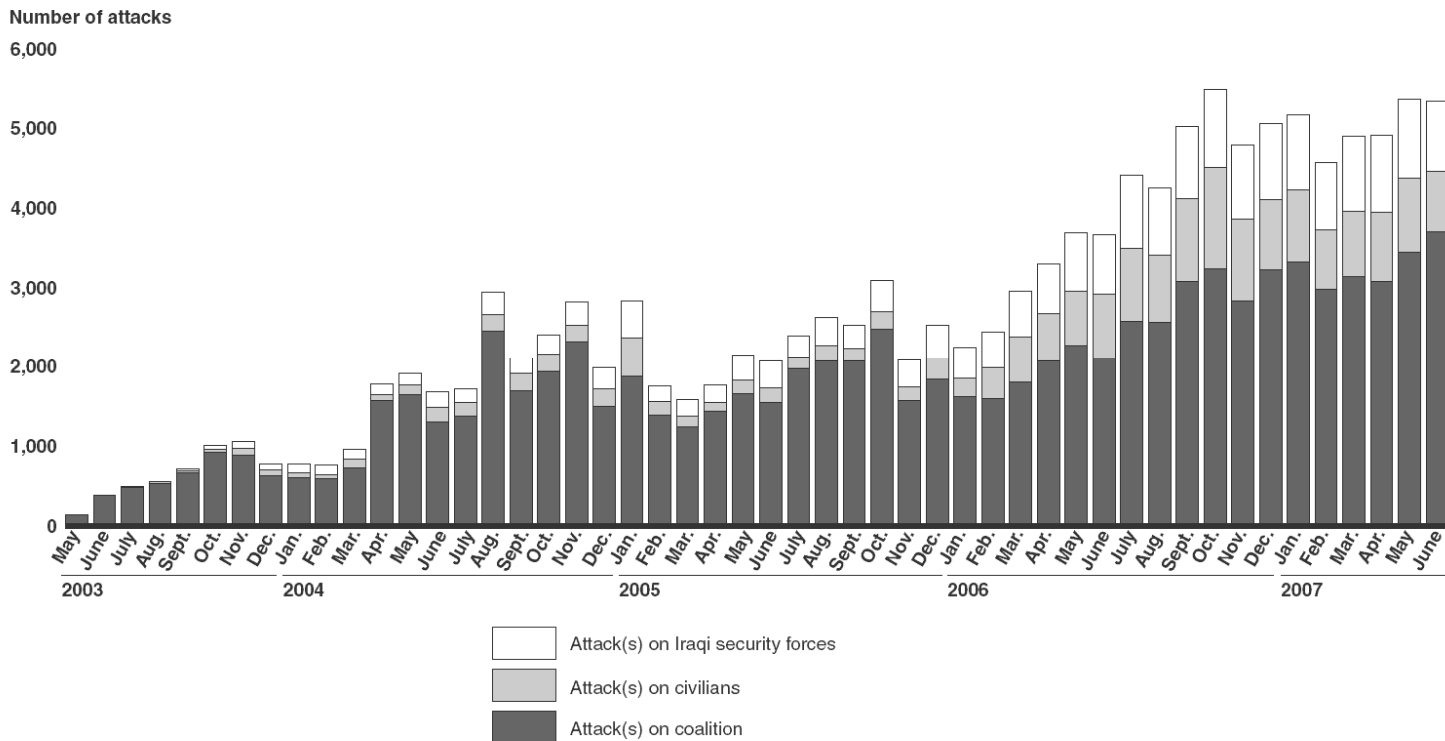


1 NOV 03 – 28 JAN 05

# Attack Trends in Iraq (pre and post Falluja Offensive)

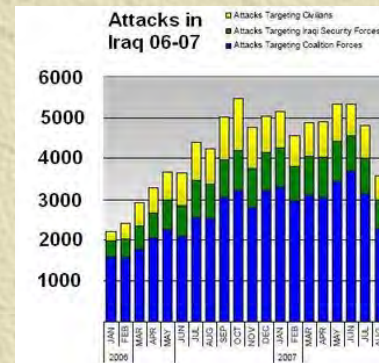


**Figure 5: Enemy-Initiated Attacks against the Coalition, Iraqi Security Forces, and Civilians (May 2003 through June 2007)**



Source: GAO analysis of DIA-reported Multi-National Force-Iraq data, June 2007.


Note: Attacks against infrastructure account for less than 1 percent of enemy-initiated attacks.





# CASE: AFGHANISTAN

Three Block War?



“Mr. Khan says the Canadian troops are more humane than the Americans who preceded them. But he sees how the guerrilla fighting has forced the Canadians into a heavily armed posture that *alienates* the people.”

- Geoffrey York, *Globe and Mail*, 27 May 2006

# Case: Afghanistan

- ✦ “Defeat” an insurgency militarily?
- ✦ Requires political solution
- ✦ Critical distinction:
  - Counter-insurgency with nation-building
  - Nation-building with counterinsurgency element
- ✦ Mixing mandates
  - Military in “humanitarian space”
  - Humanitarian actors become soft targets
    - Withdrawal of MSF and other NGOs from Kandahar
- ✦ Three Block War is not easy.
- ✦ It is a winnable strategy?



# CONCLUSIONS





✦ Useful simplification with flaws

- ◆ Simple on the surface
- ◆ Ambiguous in application

✦ Accurate description of some tactical situations

- ◆ Combat may occur
- ◆ Preparation needed

# MAJOR CONS

1) TOO SIMPLE


2) LACK OF MISSION CLARITY

3) LACKS WIDER ACCEPTANCE

4) IMPOSES EMPHASIS ON WARFIGHTING

# Simple Criticism: Inaccuracy

- ✦ Not “Three” – usually more lines of operations
- ✦ Not “Blocks” – regions, villages, buildings
- ✦ Not “War” – usually less than war




## ✦ Questionable transition: tactical to strategic

- ✦ Moving from defensive to offensive
  - Needs attention!
- ✦ Mixing mandates
  - Conflicting and counterproductive
  - 3BW fosters “grey zone operations”
- ✦ Combat is “a method not a mission”

# Recommendations

- ✦ Keep mandates clear
- ✦ Distinguish between offensive and defensive
  - “Combat if necessary but not necessarily combat”
- ✦ Goal of peace vs “defeat enemy”



Always be combat-prepared

but

do not force combat into peace support and humanitarian operations unless necessary

**Within the same mission, we will engage in a high-intensity fight against the armies of failing states, conduct stabilization or peace support operations including counter-insurgency and deliver humanitarian aid or assist others doing it (three-block war)**

?



## ✦ Develop the non-combat blocks

- ✦ “Navigating cultural and human terrain”  
(Max Boot)
- ✦ Language, anthropology
- ✦ Humanizing aspects
- ✦ “I want these people to see me as a person, not a uniform.”
- ✦ Be aware of risks to “humanitarian space”

# Fill the Intellectual Vacuum

✦ “There is a cloud of unknowing about this [3BW]: a lot of righteousness but little thought.”

– Dr. Peter Foot, 16 May 2006

✦ Lack of studies of 3BW

- Cases of success and failure
- Doctrine

✦ Modifications to existing doctrine?

- Peacekeeping, PSO and stability/stabilization missions

✦ Avoid of exaggerations

➔ More conceptual development and refinement, more codification to fill the vacuum

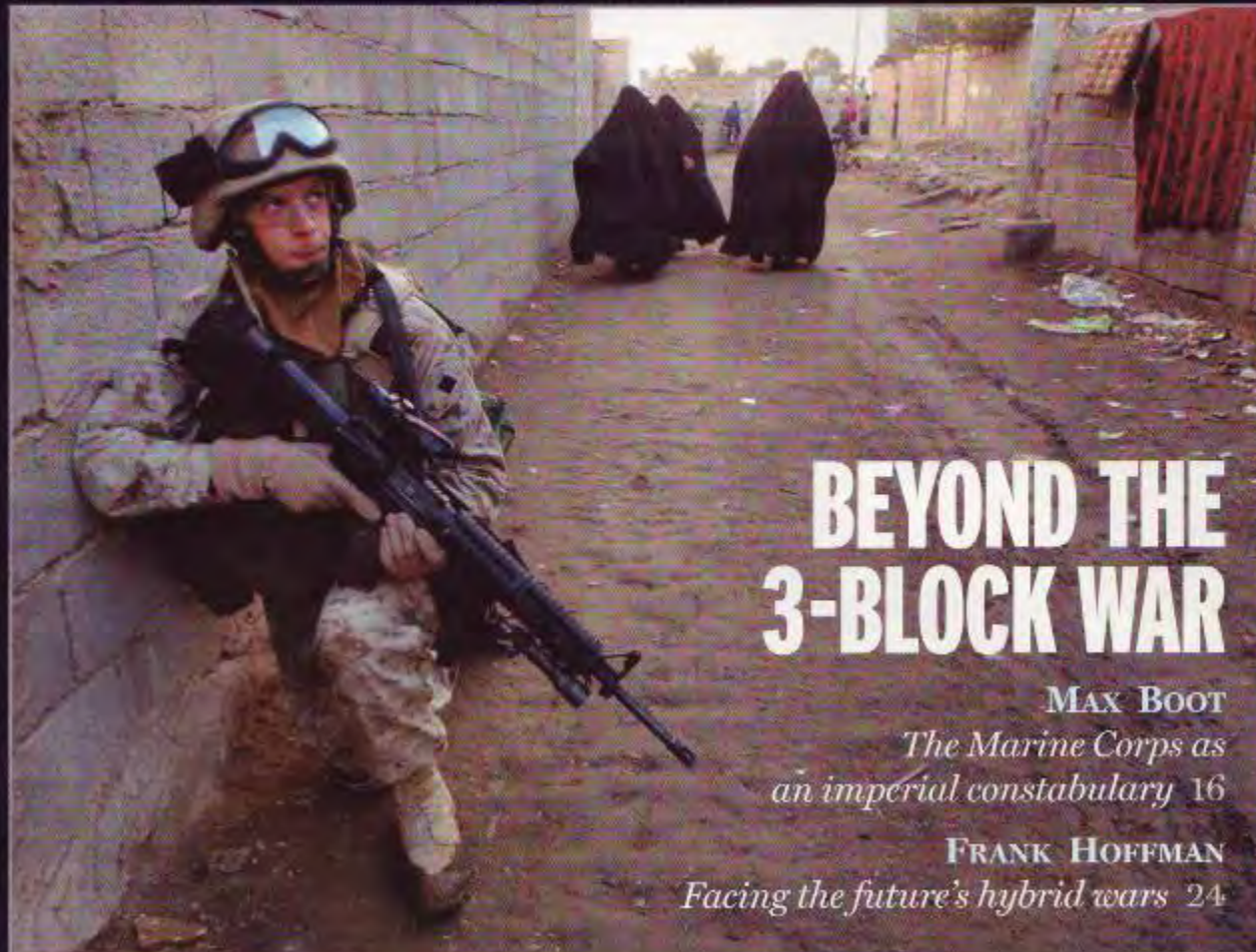


# Armed Forces Journal

March 2006

Established 1863

\$5.95



## BEYOND THE 3-BLOCK WAR

MAX BOOT

*The Marine Corps as  
an imperial constabulary 16*

FRANK HOFFMAN

*Facing the future's hybrid wars 24*

# Operations in the Last Ten years

## UN

- ✦ Angola
- ✦ Burundi
- ✦ Central Afr. Rep.
- ✦ Côte d'Ivoire
- ✦ Cyprus
- ✦ DR Congo
- ✦ Georgia
- ✦ Haiti
- ✦ Liberia
- ✦ Macedonia
- ✦ Sierra Leone
- ✦ Sudan (North-South)
- ✦ Sudan (Darfur)
- ✦ Tajikistan
- ✦ Timor Leste
- ✦ Western Sahara

## UN Interstate:

- ✦ Ethiopia-Eritrea
- ✦ Golan Heights
- ✦ Kashmir
- ✦ Lebanon

## NATO

- ✦ Afghanistan
- ✦ Bosnia
- ✦ Macedonia
- ✦ Kosovo

## US Coalitions (OEF)

- ✦ Afghanistan
- ✦ Iraq

# Alternatives

✦ Multidimensional ops

✦ 3BW → MDOs

✦ Full spectrum ops

✦ EBO, JIMP, ...

# Critique of the Critique

- ✦ Too simple vs too much mixing?
  - ◆ More than three lines of operation
  - ◆ Keep mandates clear
  
- ✦ Mixing combat with other activities will always be difficult but **MUST** be done
  
- ✦ Counter-insurgency must involve several dimensions (incl. all three blocks)
  
- ✦ Details needed



"Spreading democracy is hell."



***THE END ...***

***of the Beginning***