

what you do after this week, will help ensure that the bureaucracies in which we all work are the focal points for cross-cutting, strategic solutions rather than individualized institutional roadblocks.

3. Need to be a “learning organization”

One way to guard against such bureaucratic inertia is to design systems that promote institutional learning. This need to learn and adapt on the fly is another key lesson from past experience in counterinsurgency. As Bernard Fall tersely observed of the need for constant adaptation in COIN, “If it works, it is obsolete.”

So, we must develop a unified, government-wide approach to contemporaneous experiential learning – the kind of organizational, bottom-up learning LTC John Nagl talks about in his justly celebrated book, *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*. According to LTC Nagl, a key to success in these missions is organizational adaptability – that is the ability to learn and adapt to the changing circumstances on the ground faster than the enemy does. Or, to put it another way, we need to be able to “get inside the enemy’s learning loop.”

Since the Vietnam War the U.S. military has developed remarkable systems to capture lessons learned from the field and disseminate the knowledge gained rapidly throughout the training system. It is this system that has enabled the U.S. military to make steady improvements to many of their tactics, techniques, and procedures in Iraq and Afghanistan, such as patrolling, check points, and cordon and knock procedures.

Current examples in Iraq demonstrate that many of our commanders are both applying lessons from the past and adapting contemporaneously. Yesterday you heard from Colonel H.R. McMaster and Lieutenant General Dave Petraeus, whose approaches in Tal Afar and Mosul set examples for others. Likewise, Major General, Peter Chiarelli’s experience in Baghdad, and his emphasis on improving city infrastructure, provided a framework that has been integrated into military doctrine and concepts. What is important is that these leaders are actively spreading the word and sharing their experiences via lectures, briefings, and articles. This is leading to organizational learning as these lessons are filtered into the training and education systems. A key vehicle for this process is General Casey’s COIN academy – established in theater last year – which provides unit leaders with the most up-to-date knowledge of insurgency approaches for Iraq. Together, these leaders epitomize our commitment to learning and adapting. They are setting an example that is spreading throughout the system.

This system is a tremendous improvement on the Vietnam-era system. It provides a strong framework for developing an interagency lessons learned system that will be more responsive to the civil-military requirements of counterinsurgency. To meet the challenges we face today, these systems should be adapted in two ways:

First, the tactically-oriented approach to capturing lessons in the field was originally designed to address only part of the challenge in COIN – primarily the “kinetic” side. We should maintain those programs that are helping our soldiers stay ahead of the enemy’s tactics. But, we should also work to develop similar lessons learned programs that capture and disseminate new knowledge about the non-kinetic mission areas such as governance, reconstruction, and rule of law.

Second, as Lieutenant General Petraeus mentioned yesterday, these learning systems must be applied across all agencies of government in an integrated fashion – so that as lessons are identified, the strategy is adjusted in a coherent, unified way.

At this point, I would like to emphasize the point that learning within our organizations must also take place with respect to the development of indigenous capacity. Many parts of the US and allied governments are helping Iraq, Afghanistan and other states develop capabilities that are key to preventing or defeating insurgencies. These efforts are focused on police, justice systems, border forces, customs, counter-narcotics, intelligence, and agriculture to name a few. All of us should be working hard—and learning—to ensure we are not only helping in the right areas, but truly helping in a way that will produce durable capabilities.

4. Cultural Knowledge