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More than a COIN Flip: Improving Honors Education with Real Time Simulations Based on Contemporary Events

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On October 7, 2001, in response to ongoing support for Osama bin Laden and the al-Qaeda terror network responsible for the September 11 attacks in New York City, the United States and Great Britain attacked Taliban targets in Afghanistan with cruise missiles and airstrikes. Shortly thereafter, American ground forces were committed and played an important role in the ouster of the Taliban and the creation of a new Afghan government. America's preoccupation with Iraq beginning in the spring of 2003 arguably allowed the Taliban enough time and space to rebuild and rearm, and by the summer of 2008 the Afghan government and its American partners faced a full-blown insurgency. This insurgency, which seems destined to continue for the foreseeable future, provides a unique opportunity for honors education that emphasizes critical thinking and creativity in a collaborative real-time environment. The simulation that emerged from this experience is also readily adaptable to other contemporary issues.

Insurgencies and corresponding counterinsurgency (COIN) efforts are nothing new, and like many military historians, I have spent the last several years exploring the history of this type of warfare even as I followed contemporary developments in Afghanistan and Iraq. By late 2007 I was comfortable enough with the literature of both insurgency and counterinsurgency to propose an honors seminar that would expose students to seminal readings in both areas. I also drew upon past experimentation with role-playing exercises to design a large-scale simulation and incorporate it into the seminar. The resulting course was offered as UHON 390: Small Wars and Counterinsurgency in the fall of 2008. I should stress that I have no direct experience in the subject matter and am by training a nineteenth-century specialist. Conceptualization and design of the course were driven by personal interest, which means that any well-trained academic with an interest in a related area could teach such a course without formal training. Offering a seminar like this, especially the embedded simulation, requires as much passion for the subject as expertise.

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The semester started with selections from Karl von Clausewitz's 1832 treatise *On War* about the nature of war and the relationship between war and policy. This text provided a common point of reference for a seminar filled with students from a variety of academic disciplines. The remainder of the course was divided into thirds. The first third exposed students to seminal texts in guerrilla war, including Mao Tse-Tung's *On Guerrilla Warfare* (1937), Che Guevara's *Guerrilla War* (1961), Robert Taber's *War of the Flea: The Classic Study of Guerrilla Warfare* (1965), and Carlos Marighella's *Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla* (1969). The second third did the same for counterinsurgency, asking students to grapple with Charles Callwell's *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice* (1896), David Galula's *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (1964), two influential articles by Thomas X. Hammes defining "fourth generation" warfare in the *Marine Corps Gazette* (1994) and "fifth generation" warfare in *Military Review* (2007), and *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (2007), which defines current American counterinsurgency doctrine.

What set this course apart, and what might profitably be adapted to other honors seminars in a variety of disciplines, was the final third of the semester, where students engaged in a multi-week role-playing exercise. Past experience with simulations suggested that students would perform better on this large-scale undertaking if they were exposed early in the semester to smaller practice exercises that would build confidence and let them explore the limits of what might be possible. These practice exercises took several forms.

First, student moderators were incorporated into every class period for the first two-thirds of the semester, with each student serving as a moderator twice. Pairs of moderators led class discussion after having written a short summary and analysis of that day's reading. Students thus got used to talking in front of their peers from an informed perspective.

Second, once students finished all of the insurgency readings, they participated in a mini-simulation occupying a full class period. The fictional scenario was a present-day meeting in the Iranian city of Zahedan in Sistan-Baluchestan Province, where different elements of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard met with representatives of the Afghan Taliban and three different Afghan warlords to discuss the extent to which the Guard wished to involve themselves in the unfolding situation in Afghanistan and with whom (if anyone) they would cooperate. The class received background information about the three factions of the Revolutionary Guard that were present, about the Taliban, and about the three warlords whose representatives attended the meeting. The Guard representatives ran the meeting. The goal of the one-day simulation was some resolution about how the different parties would proceed from this point forward. To be successful, students had to incorporate ideas and concepts from their theoretical readings into their understanding of the current regional situation. The students performed well in this relatively forgiving environment where they could experiment a bit to see what might work in the larger simulation later in the semester.

Finally, as the students approached the end of their counterinsurgency reading, they participated in an in-class debate on the following resolution: "In any conflict between an established nation-state and an insurgency, the nation-state has an inherent advantage over the political and military resources of the insurgency." The class was divided into teams, assigned roles (exposition, cross-examination, or rebuttal), and given a full class period to organize their arguments, sources, and possible lines of defense. The class period that followed this preparation was devoted solely to the debate, during which team members were encouraged to collaborate. One of the teams extended that collaboration beyond huddled whispers and passed notes to the electronic sphere, collecting real-time feedback from its members via email and Facebook chat sessions.

Collectively, the experience of moderating class discussions and the two in-class exercises made the students comfortable collaborating with each other, challenging each other when necessary, and thinking creatively about how to gain maximum advantage within the rules of any given activity; this was crucial for the success of all that followed.

With the students exposed to the necessary skills, we began the extended simulation. A fictional organization called the Afghan Stability Working Group (ASWG), operating in real time during five weeks of the fall 2008 semester, was made responsible for the conceptualization, planning, and implementation of a strategy designed to restore stability to Afghanistan and the surrounding region. As course instructor (The Omniscient One in our game's parlance), I oversaw the simulation and made periodic adjustments to it but was not an active participant.

The simulation started with students using everything they had learned thus far to help determine what kinds of characters should populate the game. With thirteen students in the seminar, we settled on Afghani representatives from the Afghan Army, the Afghan central government, the Afghan police, and provincial officials from Helmand Province, Herat Province and Khost Province. They were joined by American representatives from the U.S. Army Central Command, U.S. State Department, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) as well as a liaison from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency, a Dutch Army representative from NATO's International Security Assistance Force, and an unnamed private military contractor. With the roles identified, students then used a preference system to select a specific character. Giving students some choice at this point was crucial to the simulation's overall success because several members of the seminar brought specific interests and knowledge to the table. For example, one student had done prior research on foreign development efforts and was a natural fit for the USAID role, a second was pursuing a Foreign Service career and so sought the State Department position, and a third was a former Marine who was very interested in issues associated with Central Command.

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With their roles selected, each student then received an objective from the Omniscient One that their character was supposed to achieve over the course of the simulation. The only objectives that were singular in nature were those assigned to the representatives of the Afghan police and Khost Province, who both happened to be Taliban plants tasked with doing everything possible to ensure that the Taliban were ultimately successful. Their only other instruction was simple: don't get caught. Most objectives were more nuanced. For example, the Afghan central government character was told:

You represent the interests of Hamid Karzai and others like him who hope to build a strong and united Afghanistan around a secular central government. As part of the anti-Soviet resistance during the 1978–1989 war, you knew well, supported and interacted regularly with the Taliban and other mujahedeen. You are willing to negotiate with them, but always with the intention of achieving that secular central government.

The CIA representative, like others in the game, received equally ambiguous instructions. He was advised:

You are a relatively senior field officer who joined the CIA after the Agency's involvement with the mujahedeen against the Soviets was over. You have field experience in the region (not limited to Afghanistan) as well as substantial experience in the CIA bureaucracy at Langley. You are working towards the United States' stated policy goals of establishing a free and independent Afghanistan led by a secular government, but you are not convinced that the principles outlined in FM 3–24 [*The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*] are the best way to do it, in part because it reduces the CIA's independence of action. You are more than willing to explore alternatives whenever possible.

The goal of these somewhat ambiguous objectives was to give the students ample room to improvise and adapt over the course of the game. This flexibility recognized the chaotic nature of the real situation unfolding in Afghanistan and Pakistan and provided an opportunity for students to demonstrate the extent to which they understood the material we had covered in the first two thirds of the semester; it also required them to research their roles and conduct themselves in an informed manner, assuming the moral values and ethics of their characters. They were also encouraged to work with whomever they wanted to achieve their objectives and to do so outside of class. Setting up objectives in this manner and encouraging individual creativity made the simulation's outcome less predictable, thus increasing its effectiveness as a learning exercise.

Even with the preparatory exercises, past experience with simulations has taught me that they are often slow to start. Instructors want to jump in and move things along at the very beginning, but students need to be given time and space to figure things out for themselves. They will do so quickly, especially if provided with a medium that allows constant interaction with the simulation both in and outside of class. This simulation nurtured that interaction with a blog, although one could certainly use a closed Facebook group or course management software like Desire2Learn or Blackboard. The advantage of the blog was that it allowed non-class members to observe and send the instructor private messages that could be fed back into the simulation through the Omniscient One. In this case, such feedback meant using some of the instructor's contacts who had experience in Afghanistan and Iraq. Their contributions were invaluable.

As the students settled into the simulation, the entire classroom dynamic quickly changed. During the regularly scheduled class time, the seminar operated out of a central classroom. The Omniscient One was headquartered there, updating the blog in real time and answering questions, and a large political/topographical map of Afghanistan and Pakistan was available for common reference. The students regularly split into self-selected groups that changed constantly as they negotiated with each other while trying to achieve their objectives. Our building's wireless infrastructure became particularly important as students scattered down hallways and into unused rooms with their laptops. They followed the blog but also communicated with each other via Facebook chats, texting, instant messaging, and email, sometimes simultaneously interacting with one group physically and another electronically. More than one double-cross attempt happened this way.

Many, but not all, of the students were given budgets to work with, each person's budget being known only to him or her. These fictional funds allowed students to provide goods and services, construct infrastructure and buildings, buy off other members of the simulation, or initiate acts of violence. One regularly updated blog posting maintained a growing list of items and their costs. Students could purchase a ton of school supplies, build a kilometer of all-weather road, or staff a medical clinic for a year. Those with limited or no funds negotiated with those who had funds to get access to money. Contracts were entered into and side deals were struck, with every budget transaction recorded and kept private by the Omniscient One. In short, an economy whose size was known only to the Omniscient One was created, contributing to the uncertainty surrounding the simulation. As students dreamed up projects that needed to be funded, the Omniscient One set a price and added it to the ever-growing blog posting. Students needed to watch that posting closely; several American representatives missed a line late in the simulation labeled "cost of extremist madrassa in secure location that supports students/teachers."

One major concern in constructing the simulation was how to accommodate and incorporate acts of violence that would mirror the actual situation in

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Afghanistan and Pakistan. Had the ability to initiate them been freely available, the game could easily have spiraled out of control. The resulting anarchy also would not necessarily reflect the real world, where these actions require planning, resources, and infrastructure. Our solution was to introduce the concept of Power Cards. Over the course of the simulation, players could earn Power Cards from the Omniscient One for superior game play, especially when a creative idea was rooted in the literature that the class read in the first two-thirds of the semester. Power Cards were privately awarded, with the rest of the seminar becoming aware of them only when a card was played. Even then, the seminar participants never knew exactly who played a Power Card. Over the course of five weeks, twelve Power Cards were awarded and played. Playing a Power Card also required students to spend funds, thus maintaining some realism and preventing militants from, for example, suddenly declaring they had access to the materials for a dirty radioactive bomb.

Initiating an act of violence by playing a Power Card did not guarantee positive results. All outcomes were determined by a dice roll, usually in class. For example, a student might spend funds to build and deploy an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) against a specific target, which might be another player. The Omniscient One would announce the IED explosion and roll the dice. Details of the severity of the explosion would then be posted on the blog as the simulation continued, which would in turn affect game play because students constantly monitored it during class. Here again, maintaining a degree of uncertainty forced students to think creatively, adjust their game play, and apply what they had learned earlier in the semester in ways they might not have foreseen.

One of the unique features of this simulation was the extent to which it incorporated contemporary events. Real news stories from both Western and Southwest Asian media were intermingled with fictional news bulletins from the Omniscient News Network on the course blog. Many of the stories were collected by the Omniscient One, but students looking for materials in the course of their own research also sent in many suggestions. The real news reports set the COIN simulation apart from other simulations, like those from the excellent *Reacting to the Past* series, that one sees incorporated into courses. A certain risk is involved because the instructor can never be quite sure how events will play out until they are actually happening, but the rewards were worth it: students could be absolutely certain there was no preordained outcome; the format rewarded those who immersed themselves in the subject; the uncertainty kept everyone on their toes; and there was a palpable sense that this was *real*, even though there was plenty of fiction involved. I knew that the simulation was working when a group of students conspired to remove a provincial governor, and the real provincial governor was removed by the Karzai government just two days later. The key is to pick a subject that generates enough media coverage from multiple perspectives over the course of the simulation. Finding such a subject may not be easy, but one could run simulations based on international monetary policy, U.S.-Chinese relations, health care reform,

sustainability, or any number of topics, making this approach ideal for programs that want to encourage engagement with global issues.

Simulation activities extended well beyond our formal meeting time. Group meetings happened all across campus and in local establishments at all hours, but the blog became the crucial element for fostering interaction and holding the simulation together. Three different categories of postings dominated the blog, with each type identified by an electronic tag that students could use to sort them out. The first, tagged as "Playing the Game," organized the game and provided structure when necessary. Postings here defined the scenario and rules for playing the simulation, announced when roles had been distributed and maps were posted, explained how Power Cards and budgets could be used, and encouraged players to submit press releases and communiqués for posting by the Omniscient One. When the simulation was over, this section of the blog revealed each player's hidden objective for the game. "Playing the Game" made these rules accessible at any time and also allowed the instructor to make mid-course adjustments to the game, which was particularly important when it became clear that a budget system had to be created and tweaked early in the simulation.

The second category, "Real News Releases," introduced students to a variety of media perspectives. Stories were posted from familiar sources like the Associated Press, Reuters, CNN, *The Independent* and *The Wall Street Journal*, but students were also exposed to non-Western media like al-Jazeera, the Pakistan News Service, Quqnoos.com and the Afghan News Network as well as niche-news providers like the American Forces Press Service and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. These multiple viewpoints materially enriched the simulation, suggesting perspectives, ideas, and approaches that improved the quality of game play.

The final category, "Omniscient News Network," consisted entirely of fictional news posted by the Omniscient One, who was the blog's sole administrator. Some postings came from students in the form of press releases, announcements, and open letters. Others were written by the Omniscient One to announce the playing of Power Cards and their outcomes or to create context in response to the students' actions. For example, when the fictional Afghan National Government initiated the arrest of the Khost Province representative, ONN reported the following:

Spontaneous demonstrations broke out in several key cities in Khost Province tonight as word spread of the arrest of provincial representative [John Smith] by the Afghan central government.

The Afghan National Police quickly found themselves on the defensive in Musa Khel and Khost Mela, two district capitals where the crowds were particularly active. Three policemen in Khost Mela were caught by the crowd and severely beaten before they could be rescued by their comrades.

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A correspondent in the field reports effigies of Afghan central government representative [Jane Doe] being burned in several locations and random gunfire directed at symbols of the national government.

These kinds of postings injected accountability into the simulation, helping to curb unrealistic actions by the students and guaranteeing heated discussions. They also forced students to think about what they were reading, as the instructor made clear in another post reminding students that “when there are notes of uncertainty or potential bias, ONN tries to project that either in its headlines or through its attributions, counting always on the abilities of its readers to be critical thinkers and identify potential propaganda.”

Activity on the blog picked up in the late evening hours, usually starting around 11:00pm and running to 1:00am. Once students figured out that there were (intentionally) no controls on the blog commenting system, concerted propaganda efforts spontaneously took form, often using faked identities. In one case, three Afghan provincial representatives asked the Omniscient One to post an open letter to American representatives from the State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and Central Command applauding some elements of American policy while pointing out shortfalls in other areas. Within ten minutes, a comment was posted from the Afghan National Government rebuking the provincial representatives for interfering in ongoing negotiations, which was in turn followed by heated responses from two of the three provincial representatives. Only after a fair amount of discord had been created did the real representative of the Afghan National Government come online to disavow any knowledge of the earlier statement and outline her position on the matter. The whole affair took five days to play out, and it definitely affected how members of the simulation interacted with each other until the truth emerged. Later, it became clear that the false statement was an attempt by the Pakistani intelligence representative to weaken the solid working relationship that was developing between the different Afghan representatives. Interactions like this were sometimes chaotic, but they kept students on their toes and increased the unpredictability of the game, mirroring the uncertainty and confusion of regional politics in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Simulations like this are not new. Among the best known are those in the Reacting to the Past <<http://www.barnard.edu/reacting/>> series, which are based on historical events like the French Revolution, the trial of Galileo, or Athens in 403 BC. In these simulations, students are thrust into historical situations, provided with period documents and some background about the social, political, economic, and religious context of the time, assigned goals to be achieved, and then asked to participate actively in events as they unfold. Sometimes history repeats itself, although not necessarily for the same reasons as original events, but it is not unusual for students to reach a different outcome. In truth, the outcome does not matter all that much. As several of my colleagues who use Reacting to the Past simulations have noted, students

devote incredible amounts of time to playing these kinds of game and learn accordingly. They seek out additional information on their own, work well beyond classroom boundaries with potential allies to defeat potential adversaries, absorb much more than instructors initially expect, and have a lot of fun doing it. The Afghanistan simulation followed a similar path, with my students learning more about guerrilla warfare and counterinsurgency doctrine than I have ever imparted in a traditional lecture course.

Instructors who adopt this model, especially with the equivalent of an Omniscient One overseeing a blog, should note that their time will be distributed differently than in a traditional honors discussion course. Traditional courses often require larger blocks of preparation time, with the benefit that instructors have more control over when and where the preparation will happen. Simulations that react to contemporary events, especially with a corresponding blog, require more flexibility although not necessarily more overall time. In this environment, the instructor can make meaningful contributions to the simulation in smaller but more numerous blocks of time. So, for example, one could quickly check al-Jazeera, find an interesting story about events in Pakistan that might affect the simulation, and then post it to the blog so it could become a part of game play. Student participation often heated up later in the evening, and that is when I often found myself receiving news releases or communiqués that needed to be posted quickly or questions where a timely answer kept the simulation moving along. In short, my time investment was about the same but allocated differently. The results, measured in student engagement one could readily see both in class and online, were well worth the effort.

As the students played the simulation, they also engaged in a more traditional academic assignment: writing a paper. In this case, the paper was an analysis of small wars and counterinsurgency in the context of their character's role in the simulation, supported by appropriate primary and secondary source materials. They were asked to take everything that the seminar discussed over the course of the semester and write about how their character used that information in the Afghanistan simulation, not only to define what they did but also to define what they expected their opponents to do and how they in turn would react. The papers were intriguing, demonstrating to my satisfaction that the students had really engaged with the material and absorbed it. This perception was reinforced by student comments on their course evaluations. When asked what they liked most about the course, students responded that they appreciated "the close personal interactions between everyone in the class and the topic was incredibly relevant"; enjoyed "becoming familiar with the overall concepts & applying them to real life"; and thought that "the hands-on experience was amazing. I have never taken a course so relevant to current situations. It is definitely the most fun and hands-on course I've ever experienced." When asked if they would recommend the course to other students, every student responded positively. When asked why, they responded that "it was an interesting, relevant topic and we were able to demonstrate our knowledge through a lengthy

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simulation”; that it was “an informative class that will leave you feeling like you have learned ample amounts but will make you want more”; and that they “learned as much from the other students as I did from the instructor.”

Simulations that interact with and change according to contemporary events are a different twist on an already widely used technique, but this approach really seems to work. It is time intensive, assumes a certain degree of risk because one never knows for sure what will happen in the real world, and requires a great deal of flexibility, but it engages students with their course materials and the world around them in ways that can be extraordinary.