



SMALL WARS

JOURNAL

We Have Encountered the Enemy... And it is Us

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“History is a catalogue of mistakes. It is our duty to profit by them.”

Sir B.H. Liddell Hart

There was a certain logical simplicity to the way the U.S. military trained for war prior to 9/11. During training exercises, successful units engaged the enemy, achieved their objectives, and arrived at the limit of their advance. The exercise ended and everyone broke out cigarettes and congratulated each other on a job well done. Fast forward ten years, and U.S. military forces are driving on Baghdad. We engaged the enemy, achieved our objectives and reached the limit of our advance. Everyone congratulated each other on a job well done. But eight more years of war followed.[1] We achieved all of our military objectives, but the rules of the game seemed to have changed.

We were prepared for the strictly military aspects of the war in Iraq. We spent the decade preceding 2003 honing our skills to decisively defeat a conventional opponent based on the doctrine utilized and validated in the Gulf War in 1991. Yet following the Gulf War we spent a decade in places like Somalia, Bosnia, Haiti, and Kosovo. The lessons of those conflicts – whatever they may have been – appeared to have little effect on our understanding or preparations for the next conflicts. Now that we have spent a decade in Iraq and Afghanistan, there are lessons we must learn from those conflicts in order to prepare us for future conflicts. I intend to show that conducting a comprehensive review will arm policy makers and senior leaders with contextual understanding of our recent conflicts, as well as those of the more distant past, thus aiding them in creating a military well prepared to defeat the threats it will likely face. This article will analyze the implications of the Department of Defense strategic guidance published in January of this year, entitled *Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*. [2] It will then address those implications through the need for a comprehensive review of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and conclude with recommendations for accomplishing this review.

Implications of New Guidance

What is the new guidance, and what does it guide the military to do? The answer to these questions will illustrate the complexity of the tasks the U.S. military faces. *Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* – simply referred to as the Strategic Guidance from here on – is broad guidance from the military’s senior civilian and uniformed leadership [3] on the direction and priorities of the Department of Defense in coming years. It is not unusual for the Department of Defense to publish strategic guidance. However, the context in which this most recent guidance was published is what elevates its importance, specifically a shrinking defense budget without a corresponding reduction in required capabilities. The Strategic Guidance states that: “Wholesale divestment of the capability to

conduct any mission would be unwise, based on historical and projected uses of U.S. military forces and our inability to predict the future.”[4] Essentially, the Strategic Guidance directs us to be capable of meeting every contingency.[5]

In the context of a smaller budget this directive implies that we must become more efficient and effective in maintaining *all* capabilities to varying degrees. The operative word in the directive is “wholesale;” we must decide which capabilities will remain as core capabilities, or competencies, and which capabilities will basically be mothballed. Depending upon which capabilities are deemed part of the core could require potentially significant force restructure and reorganization, doctrinal review and revision, and training and professional education reform. The full scope of the implications of the Strategic Guidance and budget constraints will gain clarity in the coming months as the Department of Defense crafts policy and revised force structure to meet the priorities established by our senior leaders.

However, the groundwork informing those policies is already well underway. For instance, the Army is already reviewing the structure and functionality of its brigade combat teams as it looks to cut eight brigades from the current force.[6] This isn’t to say that the Army is simply slashing unit numbers, as there is a concerted effort underway to examine and potentially reorganize the structure of the remaining brigades based on future potential threats. The Army is also in the process of revising its doctrine, and not just individual field manuals. The entire doctrine process is being reformed.[7] The Navy and Air Force have developed the Air Sea Battle Concept,[8] and the Marine Corps is preparing to return to a more traditional expeditionary role. Some of these initiatives have been long in development, but the Strategic Guidance has given the individual Services within the Department of Defense a renewed sense of urgency to define their future roles. So, while the actual policy implications may not be clear yet, the Strategic Guidance is already shaping our preparations for the next conflict.

The Strategic Guidance acknowledges that we must “retain and refine the lessons learned, expertise, and specialized capabilities that have been developed over the past ten years.” It goes on to say that “U.S. forces will no longer be sized to conduct large-scale, prolonged stability operations.”[9] There is no arguing this point. Budget constraints will not allow us to willingly embark on those types of operations on a large scale. Those responsible for shaping Department of Defense policy have the daunting task of reshaping the military and determining which lessons, expertise, and specialized capabilities should be retained. However, we must not confuse tactics, techniques, and procedures specific to the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan with enduring lessons that can be applied to future conflicts. An unintended consequence of the Strategic Guidance could very well be that the Services, in a rush to define their future roles, proceed under the assumption we have already learned and institutionalized the lessons of the last decade.

The Cart Before the Horse

Have we put the cart before the horse in determining how we should prepare for future conflicts? Until we understand the context of the lessons learned in Iraq and Afghanistan we are improperly applying these lessons to the future force. We still haven’t determined *what* we learned in context, much less how to *apply* what we learned to the defense policies being developed. The Strategic Guidance outlines the primary missions envisioned for us, and it may be easy to overgeneralize the lessons of the last ten years as only applicable to two of those missions.[10] However, a deeper understanding of those lessons would demonstrate wider applicability to the range of missions. This deeper understanding would also debunk a widely held belief that the primary lesson to be learned from Iraq and Afghanistan is that we shouldn’t become involved in those types of complex environments to begin with.

Establishing a deeper understanding begins with looking at the entirety of the conflicts in Iraq and

Afghanistan versus only focusing on the counterinsurgency aspects. The initial stages of operations in Afghanistan arguably represent a classic example of the employment of Special Operations Forces. A small, elite force, backed by superior technology, assisted an indigenous force in routing a much larger, better organized and equipped enemy. Yet we are now entering the eleventh year of our involvement in Afghanistan. The initial stages of the invasion of Iraq arguably represent a classic example of combined arms maneuver warfare. Our smaller, more mobile, more technologically advanced force completely routed a numerically superior force, taking Baghdad in just 21 days. Yet it took us 3,174 days to get out of Baghdad.[11] The point is that we did not *intend* or *expect* to execute counterinsurgency operations in either country. While we may prefer or default to looking for lessons learned only in the period when we “turned the tide” in Iraq or Afghanistan, perhaps we should be looking to the period between our early victories and the emergence of the insurgency for the lessons that need to endure. Ignoring these potentially painful lessons may lead to the institutionalization of less painful but superficial lessons, greatly increasing the risk to the force in the future.

Critics of counterinsurgency and stability operations might argue that the lesson we really need to learn from the last decade is to avoid involvement in them in the first place. This argument suffers from three critical flaws. The first, as mentioned above, is that we did not intend to get involved in counterinsurgency operations in Iraq *or* Afghanistan, and only through a comprehensive review of our operations will we come close to knowing how that really happened. The second flaw is that the argument ignores the nature of war. Most militaries don’t choose counterinsurgency, but rather insurgency chooses them. Our future adversaries are unlikely to play to our strengths, i.e. combined arms maneuver warfare, but are likely to seek asymmetric alternatives that attack our vulnerabilities. The last ten years have provided those adversaries with plenty of material to study and learn from. The third and final flaw to the argument is that we go where we are directed by our civilian leadership and must be prepared to execute any operation once we arrive; this includes counterinsurgency and stability operations. When taken as a whole, the bottom line is that the U.S. military does not necessarily have a choice in whether we counter another insurgency, regardless of size.

The Case for Review

If we don’t really have a choice in the types of missions we are directed to execute, how do we adequately prepare for the full spectrum of operations? Herein potentially lies the great paradox of the U.S. military: the better our conventional capabilities, the more likely we are to face increasingly irregular and asymmetric threats. Our experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan not only demonstrated that we must be prepared for the unexpected; they should also remind us of the importance of history. Irregular conflicts are nothing new. Since 1815, 385 of 464 recorded conflicts occurred between state and non-state actors, i.e. irregular conflicts.[12] Simply put, we cannot wish away counterinsurgency and stability operations. This being the case, we must learn not only the relevant lessons of the past decade, but also the lessons of history. In this section I will outline how the U.S. military might accomplish this.

As mentioned earlier, the Strategic Guidance states that the military must retain and refine the lessons of the last ten years. A comprehensive review would not only answer that call, it would support the concept of “reversibility,” which essentially states that we must be able to quickly regenerate the capabilities and capacity to meet the types of threats we may face in the future.[13] By learning from the last ten years, we can more efficiently and effectively focus the training, education, planning, and organization of the Army to meet the needs of the nation. Simply focusing our efforts on the hundreds, if not thousands, of tactics, techniques and procedures we developed over the last decade for the tactical and operational fight would ensure a *lack* of focus, standardization, and understanding throughout the force.

A comprehensive review would not be a history of *these* wars – Iraq and Afghanistan – but must include a

historical component. As such, I recommend two parallel endeavors. The first is obviously that of the U.S. military. The second is an in-depth, qualitative examination of historical examples of irregular conflicts. Significant quantitative study has been done on irregular conflict,^[14] but in order to glean lessons beyond statistical data from those conflicts, we will need the assistance of military historians to sift through the mountain of information that is the history of irregular conflict. I believe history has much to teach us about irregular conflict, but not restricted to how they were waged. What may be more applicable to our understanding of future conflicts is how those historical examples developed, the level or preparedness of the counterinsurgent, and the nature of the environment in which the conflict took place.

The comprehensive review of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan should be broken into chronological phases of the two wars. As a suggestion, I would break them down in the following manner:

- 1) Pre-war planning, intelligence, and understanding of the nature of the environment.^[15]
- 2) Invasion operations through the fall of the ruling regimes.
- 3) Fall of the ruling regimes through the emergence of the insurgency.
- 4) Reconstruction and development activities and full blown insurgency.
- 5) The “Surges,” and the transition to host nation control.
- 6) Drawdown and withdrawal.

Analysis should be conducted within these phases on our efforts in the areas of development, governance, security operations, information operations, and the security force assistance mission. As the review identifies potential enduring lessons they should analyze their impact by asking questions like:^[16]

- 1) Was this lesson tactical, operational, or strategic/policy level?
- 2) What were the implications of those lessons on the short-term and then long-term progress of the war effort, i.e. were some short-term successes actually counterproductive to long-term success?
- 3) Did accomplishment of a military objective compromise political or governance objectives?
- 4) Were lessons specific only to the context of Iraq or Afghanistan?

The review board should be led by a senior, retired general officer with directorates focused on conventional ground combat forces, special operations forces, intelligence, logistics, civil affairs, interagency, and aid and development. The directorates would be responsible for analyzing the above mentioned phases in the context of their respective focus areas. We should actively seek participation in the review by other agencies that operated in Iraq and Afghanistan. Gaining the participation of those agencies would not only provide their unique perspective, it would lend significantly more weight to any findings and recommendations. The review would culminate in a collaborative effort between the review board and military historians to compare and analyze the results of their respective studies. The outcome of this effort would be a comprehensive narrative of properly contextualized lessons learned, as well as recommendations for incorporating those lessons into doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership, personnel and facilities, or in Army parlance DOTMLPF solutions.

From a historical perspective, this would not be the first time that a Western military conducted a comprehensive review. Following World War I the commander of the German Army, General Hans von Seeckt, initiated a comprehensive review of his army’s operations during the war. This review spurred the creation of almost 60 committees dedicated to learning the lessons of that war. The results of the review arguably led to the development of “blitzkrieg.” General von Seeckt realized that his Army had reached an

inflection point, and that to prepare for where the future would take them, they needed to understand where they came from. Another more recent example is the Holloway Commission, initiated after the “Desert One” disaster in the Iranian desert in 1980. While the Holloway Commission only focused on a single, rather small operation, its implications reverberated throughout the entire U.S. military. In conjunction with the Packard Commission of 1985, the Holloway Commission laid the groundwork for the passage of the Goldwater-Nichols Act, which completely reformed not only the structure of the military, but more importantly how it functioned as a whole.

Conclusion

This article does not advocate the U.S. military’s voluntary future involvement in irregular conflicts. It does advocate *understanding* irregular conflicts so we are adequately prepared to confront them. While our funding and strength levels will return to pre- 9/11 levels,^[17] we clearly cannot afford to return to the pre-9/11 mindset. Our doctrine, training, and planning did not keep pace with the changing nature of the world and the threat we faced. We were prepared for the conventional threat, but not what followed. I have laid out what I believe must follow now. Failure to reflect on our operations in Iraq and Afghanistan will result in our being ill-prepared for the future.

[1] This anecdote has been utilized numerous times by LTC John Paganini, Director of the Army’s Counterinsurgency Center during pre-deployment Counterinsurgency Seminars for brigade combat teams deploying to Afghanistan.

[2] U.S. Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, (Washington, DC, January 2012). http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf

[3] As noted by Secretary of Defense, Leon Panetta, in his opening message for the Strategic Guidance, “This guidance reflects the President’s strategic direction to the Department [of Defense] and was deeply informed by the Department’s civilian and military leadership, including the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Secretaries of the Military Departments, and the Combatant Commanders.”

[4] *Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, p. 6

[5] The Strategic Guidance identifies ten primary missions of the U.S. Military: 1) Counter Terrorism and Irregular Warfare, 2) Deter and Defeat Aggression, 3) Project Power Despite Anti-Access/Area Denial Challenges, 4) Counter Weapons of Mass Destruction, 5) Operate Effectively in Cyberspace and Space, 6) Maintain a Safe, Secure, and Effective Nuclear Deterrent, 7) Defend the Homeland and Provide Support to Civil Authorities, 8) Provide a Stabilizing Presence, 9) Conduct Stability and Counterinsurgency Operations, 10) Conduct Humanitarian, Disaster Relief, and Other Operations.

[6] Michelle Tan, “BCT Shuffle,” *Army Times*, p.18, 27 February 2012.

[7] This reform is referred to as “Doctrine 2015.” For a synopsis of this concept see <http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/adp/Repository/Doctrine%202015%20Briefing%2027%20Oct%202011.pdf>

[8] Van Tol, et. al., “Air Sea Battle: A Point-of-Departure Operational Concept,” *Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments*, 2010. <http://www.csbaonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/2010.05.18-AirSea-Battle.pdf>

(accessed 17 February 2012).

[9] *Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, p. 6

[10] “Counter Terrorism and Irregular Warfare,” and “Conduct Stability and Counterinsurgency Operations.”

[11] The 21 days to take Baghdad refers to major combat operations in Iraq taking place from 20 March 2003 – 9 April 2003. The 3,174 days to get out of Baghdad refers to the period from 9 April 2003 – 17 December 2011 when the last U.S. troops in Iraq crossed into Kuwait.

[12] Sarkees, Meredith Reid and Frank Wayman (2010). *Resort to War: 1816 - 2007*. CQ Press. www.correlatesofwar.org (accessed 13 February 2012).

[13] *Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, p. 7

[14] Paul, Clark, Grill, “*Victory Has a Thousand Fathers.*” RAND Corporation, 2010; for a synopsis by the authors see <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/650-paul.pdf>

[15] I purposefully make the distinction between intelligence and an understanding of the nature of the environment because the general nature of pre-war intelligence was enemy focused and did not necessarily take into account socio-cultural considerations.

[16] The suggested questions are by no means all-inclusive and are only meant to generate thought and discussion.

[17] U.S. Department of Defense, *Defense Budget Priorities and Choices*, (Washington, DC, January 2012).

About the Author



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