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This paper seeks to address the absence of discussion concerning the military's role in the lack of success in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is not meant to address the issues of failure, but the lack of discussion of failure. Overwhelming public support, an unremitting operational tempo, and the changing threat environment have allowed the military to avoid a much-needed debate concerning its role in failed national policy in Iraq and Afghanistan. These current circumstances coupled with our military culture equate to a deafening silence that may be as much a crisis as the military's inability to achieve policy. The only possible catalyst for an honest dialogue is for institutional leaders to drive the conversation in professional forums.

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The Weight of a Question:

Why the U.S. Military Does Not Discuss Strategic and Operational Failures in Iraq and Afghanistan

Sean Patrick Dynan

<u>Is there a problem?</u>

If success, or failure, in warfare is the greatest metric of a warfighting organization's competence, the confidence that America has in its military is well placed. Over the last two decades, the United States Military succeeded in two campaigns. Our nation's success in Iraq and Afghanistan are a complete, or at least partial, validation of Department of Defense policies, military organizational structure, operational concepts, procurement and budgeting practices, education and training programs, and the current iteration of the American way of war. If the above statements are either blatantly, or arguably, inaccurate, then one would think there would be a significant debate within the military at large or at least within individual services. If the purpose of the military is to win wars, then it is reasonable to assume that if we had not achieved victory in Iraq and Afghanistan, that our military would be in crisis. Failure of our military to achieve our nation's goals would ostensibly result in an external and internal call for reform and change. Anything less would be a dereliction of duty. All the above seems logical…except the premise of the argument is false. After two decades of war, the US Military cannot claim success in Iraq or Afghanistan; and yet the firestorm of intellectual debate has yet to occur.

This paper seeks to address the absence of discussion concerning the military's role in the lack of success in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is not meant to address the issues of failure, but the lack of discussion of failure. Simply put, who do we hold responsible for our own silence, why is it occurring, and how do we get beyond it? For the United States Military to net the intellectual and organizational lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan, senior leaders must openly discuss the military's role in strategic and operational failures.

<u>The Weight of a Question</u>

When reaching out to peers and mentors concerning this paper, my question, "Are we adequately discussing failure in Iraq and Afghanistan," typically resulted in a long, silent, awkward pause. Responses included: "Did we fail?", "Is it failure or a lack of success?", "How do we know we failed if we're still there?", "It's too soon to tell.", "We didn't fail.", "It's not that simple.", and "That's a stupid and leading question". This question is uncomfortable, provocative, and leading. Yet the fact that multiple military professionals cannot provide a common answer concerning the outcome of a two decade-long endeavor identifies the core of the issue; there is no professional narrative concerning our lack of success in our nation's longest wars. This is an emotional question that carries significant baggage, qualifiers, and perspectives. From the perspective of the participants, to discuss war as if it were a win-lose game seems callus and reductionist, but the conversation must start somewhere. Unfortunately, a political climate that places the military on a pedestal and the military's denial to accept a role in failure, conspires against an institutional discussion. This is a problem.

We ignore the experiences of our most recent wars at the expense of future success. Seventeen years after the Vietnam War escalated in 1965, professional magazines were aflame with ideas concerning what went wrong in Vietnam and how US forces needed to change as a result. The concepts debated were the seeds of Maneuver Warfare and overwhelming success in the Gulf War. Although circumstances associated with the on-going efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq are different than Vietnam, the question should be asked: how long must we fight before the military's role in operational and strategic shortfalls is discussed? Seventeen years after the initial invasion of Afghanistan, there is little discussion concerning failures and far less passion concerning a need for change.

If anything short of success is a catalyst for change in the military, why does so little seem to have changed over the past seventeen years? Are military professionals and leaders to close to the problem both emotionally and intellectually? Have tactical successes nested in operational blundering made us unable to see the forest for the trees? Perhaps our deep thinking on critical issues, like winning wars, rightly belongs to think tanks. Can only an outside agency, such as congress, enact significant change, as it did with Goldwater Nichols in 1986? No. History demonstrates that the US military is capable of internal-driven innovation and change. Amphibious warfare, Air/Land battle, and the Powell Corollary are examples of operational concepts and ideas created within the force that changed the way the US military equipped itself and fought. However, all three of the above examples are based on the recognition of a crisis; one due to foresight of a future conflict and the other two because of failures in a past conflict. In all cases, recognition of crisis was the catalyst for change. Unfortunately, avoidance of discussing military failure in Iraq and Afghanistan has resulted in a failure to recognize crisis. Without the recognition of crisis there is no momentum for change.

Why does the problem exist?

As a culture, the U.S. military holds intellectual bravery in high regard. It manifests in the military's ability to challenge assumptions, police its own behavior, and correct deficiencies. In several articles and in his book titled "The Generals," author Thomas Ricks raised concerns about institutional and personal self-interest over riding the needs of the nation. Ricks argues that since the 1960's senior military leaders have been more focused on careerism and parochial service concerns rather than mission accomplishment. He further argues that the culture of self-interest is evident in the military's avoidance of firing senior leaders and an unwillingness in the

officer corps, in general, to take risks in pursuit of mission accomplishment.[1]

At odds with Thomas Ricks assertion, the military does place mission accomplishment as the highest ideal and seeks operational efficiency to the greatest extent possible. At times, these two ideals conflict with one another due to priority or expediency, but that does not equate to purposefully choosing parochial interests over national goals. The services seek perfection in their assigned mission sets; a fact demonstrated by consistent tactical success over the last two decades. A culture that minimizes human loss while seeking the greatest gains is not a formula for a zero-defect mentality. Instead it forces the military to constantly seek out areas requiring improvement, specifically at the individual and unit level. As a culture we recognize failure in ourselves, our units, and in those around us and we take almost perverse pleasure in calling attention to it. Thomas Ricks views the military's desire to mitigate risk and lack of high-profile reliefs as proof of an inverted zero-defect mentality. In Thomas Ricks view, the military fails to hold leaders responsible because responsibility in a zero-defect force equates to professional ruin. Further, Ricks argues that the symptom of the military's inverted zero-defect mentality is a lack of mission accomplishment. However, Ricks' conclusions are wrong. Stating that the military practices a culture of zero-defect is misleading and inaccurate.

I offer myself as an example. I have been serving on borrowed time since I was a Lieutenant. On my first deployment, I received three non-punitive letters of caution. In three of the five companies I have led, Marines have died while under my command. I have led Marines that have caused international incidents. I have caused an international incident. As a Lieutenant Colonel, my top-rated company commander was accused and eventually found guilty

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[1]Ricks, Thomas E. 2012. *The Generals: American Military Command from World War II to Today*. New York: Penguin Press. an abbreviated version of Ricks conclusions can be found in his article in the Harvard Business Review: Ricks, Thomas E. 2012. *What Ever Happened to Accountability?*. Vol. 90. United States: Harvard Business Review.

of a stolen valor violation a week after my battalion change of command. I made decisions and mistakes in combat that will haunt me for the rest of my life. On every occasion, mentors, seniors, and peers have held me accountable for my mistakes. These infractions and moments of failure, from the mundane to the catastrophic, define who I am as an officer far more than any of my successes. In a true zero-defect culture, the above resume would not equate to professional longevity. The fact that I am a Lieutenant Colonel demonstrates that I have not served in a zero-defect force and that Thomas Ricks' assertions are too broad.

The average military unit consistently demonstrates the ability to identify and fix problems as it moves through its training and deployment lifecycle. Through inspections, training exercises, maintenance reviews and observation, a unit employs methods to certify it is mission ready and operating up-to-standard. Hotwashes and after-action reports are conducted routinely to ensure lessons identified become lessons learned. Outstanding units learn from the mistakes of other organizations and consistently get ahead of issues before they manifest into problems. Much like the individual, when a unit fails and then fails to address issues, senior commanders hold the unit accountable. In the case of unit accountability, common practices demonstrate that Thomas Ricks' conclusions cannot be applied across the force.

Thomas Ricks' hypothesis is valid when viewed on a larger scale. As an institution, the military highlights its sacrifice and success. The military secured Al Anbar, the province deemed lost to insurgents. The coalition took on the heart of the Taliban insurgency in Helmand Province. Both cases were tactical successes that did not equate to strategic ends; but we do not talk about that aspect of the experience. Tactical victory without operational success is a key indicator that the military has stopped asking the harder questions. As demonstrated, Thomas Ricks' idea of an inverted zero-defect mentality is not systemic at the individual or unit level;

however, it absolutely exists at the institutional level. Due to circumstances, the institution has ceased to challenge its operational and strategic missteps and instead relied on tactical actions as its metrics for success. These circumstances demonstrate why senior military leaders must force the internal debate concerning Iraq and Afghanistan.

Sources of the Problem

The last two decades have seen subtle changes in the way the military operates. These changes have directly impacted the lack of internal discussion. The two most significant are the continuation of a high operational tempo, even after a significant draw down in combat deployments, and the rise of contractor support throughout the military, specifically in higher headquarters. The sustained operational tempo has resulted in little time for veterans to consider the larger context of the wars in which they are fighting. In most cases, down time is either focused on understanding experiences on a personal level or used as much needed time to rest between deployments. If asked to write an article while operating on a 1:2 deployment to dwell ratio, most military members find intellectual pursuits at odds with mission preparation. The result is not a lack of desire at the tactical level to discuss operational and strategic mistakes, but a lack of time.

In many ways, the lack of downtime available to service members has directly led to the requirement of robust contractor support in senior commands. As military members rotate through higher headquarters, contractors provide continuity and increased intellectual rigor in product development. Coupled with detailed studies published by think tank's like RAND and CNA, a significant amount of the military's heavy thinking is outsourced. When war with Germany and Japan was on the horizon in August 1941, General Marshall turned to then-Major Albert Wedemeyer to establish, what became known as, the Victory Plan. If the same

circumstances were to occur today it is reasonable to assume the Pentagon would requisition the alphabet soup of think tanks to conduct a study. Contractors and think tanks add significant value to the force, but they also have created an expectation that the harder problems can and should be outsourced. The message sent is two-fold: 1) as the DoD takes over ever more roles from other Departments, it needs contractors to absorb new requirements and 2) the scope and scale of military activities has expanded so much that the tactical demands placed on military members requires outside sources to provide strategic thought, continuity, and depth. The logical conclusion of this frightening development is a lack of desire within the military to debate problems above the tactical level.

An unfortunate hazard associated with being a military professional is that there is always another adversary for which to prepare. As described in the recently published National Defense Strategy, the US military focus is now on China and Russia. With the shift in priority away from violent extremist organizations, the military is reorienting on a different type of threat. A threat that is deadlier and less complicated. This quick shift from the Global War on Terrorism to deterrence of revisionist powers is now consuming the majority of the military's intellectual capacity. As a result, there is little time or desire to revisit the mistakes of the last seventeen years. Additionally, since we are still active in both Iraq and Afghanistan there is the expectation that time and continued strategic patience will result in achieving the elusive strategic goals initially sought in the early 2000's. This rationalization is reasonable considering the lack of pressure on the military to change.

According to gallup polls published in June 2017, the US military remains the highest-rated government institution. The military has enjoyed the confidence of the American people for decades, hovering above a 70% approval rating. Military members, often showered with

"thank you for your service," have benefitted from almost universal good will and respect from the American people. In its extreme form, this perspective has led to the belief that standing for the national anthem is no longer about national pride and unity, but a recognition of the sacrifices of service members. However, being placed on a pedestal comes at a cost. News media stations treat criticism of the military as un-American, stopping public debate before it begins. Military decision making, spending, and a lack of success go unquestioned by the public at large. *The Atlantic* February 2015 article "The Tragedy of the American Military," noted that both the public and politician's "reverent but disengaged attitude toward the military…[has resulted in] public inattention to the military, born of having no direct interest in what happens to it, allowing both strategic and institutional problems to fester."[2] Today's public has replaced the hyper-opinionated environment of the Vietnam era with a unified malaise that believes providing over-blown praise to the military is a civic duty. In the current environment, the military cannot expect harsh criticism or a call for change to occur from either Congress or the American people. If Congress and the American people are not going to hold the military accountable for operational and strategic disappointments, it is both a professional duty and moral imperative that the military hold itself accountable.

Recommendation

If culture and circumstances act as antibodies for institutional review, only institutional leaders can infect the force with the desire to openly discuss failures in Iraq and Afghanistan. As

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[2] Fallows, James. January/February 2015. *The Tragedy of the American Military*. Vol. 315. Boston: Atlantic Media, Inc. http://usnwc.summon.serialssolutions.com/2.0.0/link/0/eLvHCXMwY2AwNtlz0EUrEwwSU1OTDc2NU40SU0DJKNE41TLR1NlwNSkpBXTiCmj4l9w4ltAiMNlyCLq4ELQ1BhrdsFlSXHSn5CeDRs31DUHnoJgCuw8m9gWFuqB7pEDzrdBLNZgZWEEtBQsWBlYnV7-AlKQmMfj2R2CvB9iytDAyxSiDwRWLmwADbPlsaXFeebJeZkoufH802oGNFLlTkEEAdpK0giMkrQgxMKXmiTCohHi4KoQEObq7ukQq-LspgLiwmyAVfD19PEMcgyJFGTTcXEOcPXRhNscDUwdoyD8xLzW_tDgeYbexGANLXn5eqgSDgkmKkUmiqUGauZmppYlhSiKwCQI6dd0oySAVGGapiZIMigSNkyJCjTQDF7B5YQoZsJBhYCkpKk2VZWAFBygAktWgow

Service Chiefs reorient their forces toward future war and rising threats, they should simultaneously direct a broad and detailed review of the last seventeen years. Joint PME schools should mandate a block of instruction that presents lessons learned in Iraq and Afghanistan along all three levels of warfare. Professional publications should solicit essay contests to discuss how the lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan will apply in future war. Services need to embrace the power of social media and encourage frank professional discussion online, seeking to crowd source ideas from veterans across all ranks. Senior leaders are meeting with increased frequency to discuss the threats of revisionist powers; but they have not had the equivalent conference to discuss what went wrong in Iraq and Afghanistan. The current lack of institutional self-reflection provided by senior leaders sends the message that we either do not know where we have gone wrong or that failure to achieve policy goals does not matter. Meanwhile, junior military leaders and the American public have become almost indifferent to the constant battlefield reviews that ultimately end up with our senior leaders requesting more troops. After seventeen years of doing the same thing over and over, again, and expecting a different result, when will we recognize that operations and strategy in the 21st century call for a different approach? Recognition will only occur if senior leaders open the floor to discussion.

This does not require a mea culpa on the part of the military or its leaders, only the recognition that hidden in the last two decades are some of the keys to future conflict and that we may not yet recognize them. Our adversaries have studied our experiences over the last seventeen years with great interest and learned. We must ensure we are doing the same and not allowing pride to get in the way of progress. We have earned the right as an institution to make intellectual gains from our experiences and sacrifices. At the individual and unit level, the military seeks to optimize tactical performance. Operational and strategic leaders need to force

the next step and ensure operational and strategic lessons are understood, shared, and then used to shape the future force.

Conclusion

The US military has yet to achieve US policy aims in Iraq and Afghanistan, yet the debate concerning failure has barely surfaced. The lack of self-reflection on the part of the military is a leadership problem that only leadership can solve. The contemporary culture of the military allows for mistakes and celebrates tackling issues at the individual and unit level; however, an institutional zero-defect mentality has set in. Overwhelming public support, an unremitting operational tempo, and the changing threat environment have allowed the military to avoid a much-needed debate concerning its role in failed national policy in Iraq and Afghanistan. These current circumstances coupled with our military culture equate to a deafening silence that may be as much a crisis as the military's inability to achieve policy. The only possible catalyst for an honest dialogue is for institutional leaders to drive the conversation in professional forums. Failure to discuss failure will only lead to continued missteps. If the past is prologue, learning the right lessons from the past seventeen years should result in reforms that enable future success.