



# ANBAR AWAKENS: The Tipping Point

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*Hard is not hopeless.*

—General David Petraeus,  
testimony to Congress,  
September 2007

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PHOTO: A U.S. Army Soldier from Task Force 1-35 searches for insurgents across the street from Outpost 293 in Ar Ramadi, Al Anbar Province, Iraq, after the outpost was attacked by mortar and small arms fire, 24 July 2006, during Operation Iraqi Freedom. (U.S. Air Force, TSGT Jeremy T. Lock)

**T**HE STUNNING SECURITY IMPROVEMENTS in Al Anbar province during 2007 fundamentally changed the military and political landscape of Iraq. Many, both in and outside the military (and as late as November 2006), had assessed the situation in Anbar as a lost cause. The “Anbar Awakening” of Sunni tribal leaders and their supporters that began in September 2006 near Ramadi seemed to come out of nowhere. But the change that led to the defeat of Al-Qaeda in Ramadi—what some have called the “Gettysburg of Iraq”—was not a random event.<sup>1</sup> It was the result of a concerted plan executed by U.S. forces in Ramadi. Tactical victory became a strategic turning point when farsighted senior leaders, both Iraqi and American, replicated the Ramadi model throughout Anbar province, in Baghdad, and other parts of the country, dramatically changing the Iraq security situation in the process.

## The “Ready First Combat Team”

The 1st Brigade of the 1st Armored Division, the “Ready First Combat Team,” was at the center of the Anbar Awakening. When we arrived in Ramadi in June 2006, few of us thought our campaign would change the entire complexion of the war and push Al-Qaeda to the brink of defeat in Iraq. The Soldiers, Marines, Sailors, and Airmen who served in or with our brigade combat team (BCT) enabled the Anbar Awakening through a deliberate, often difficult campaign that combined traditional counterinsurgency (COIN) principles with precise, lethal operations. The skilled application of the same principles and exploitation of success by other great units in Anbar and other parts of Iraq spread the success in Ramadi far beyond our area of operations (AO) at a pace no one could have predicted.

The Ready First enabled the Anbar Awakening by—

- Employing carefully focused lethal operations.
- Securing the populace through forward presence.
- Co-opting local leaders.
- Developing competent host-nation security forces.
- Creating a public belief in rising success.
- Developing human and physical infrastructure.

The execution of this approach enabled the brigade to set conditions, recognize opportunity, and exploit success when it came, to create a remarkable turnaround.

## Ramadi on the Brink

In the summer of 2006, Ramadi by any measure was among the most dangerous cities in Iraq.<sup>2</sup> The area of operations averaged over three times more

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*After the Fallujah offensive, the Americans tried to quell the insurgency in Ramadi with a combination of political maneuvers and the cooperation of tribal leaders to root out foreign Islamist fighters ... But that plan has spectacularly fallen apart: The men who dared to ally themselves with the Americans ... quickly learned that the U.S. military couldn't protect them. Insurgents killed 70 of Ramadi's police recruits in January, and at least half a dozen high-profile tribal leaders have been assassinated since then ... Ramadi has become a town where anti-American guerrillas operate openly and city bureaucrats are afraid to acknowledge their job titles for fear of being killed ... The government center in downtown Ramadi ... comes under gunfire or mortar attacks daily.*

—Megan K. Stack and Louise Roug, "Fear of Big Battle Panics Iraqi City," *Los Angeles Times*, 11 June 2006.

attacks per capita than any other area in the country. With the exception of the embattled government center and nearby buildings held by a company of Marines, Al-Qaeda-related insurgents had almost complete freedom of movement throughout the city. They dominated nearly all of the city's key structures, including the city hospital, the largest in Anbar province. Their freedom of movement

allowed them to emplace complex subsurface IED belts, which rendered much of the city no-go terrain for U.S. and Iraqi Army (IA) forces.

The situation in Ramadi at this point was markedly different from that in Tal Afar, where the Ready First began its tour of duty. Although Ramadi was free of the sectarian divisions that bedeviled Tal Afar, it was the provincial capital, it was at least four times more populous, and it occupied a choke point along the key transit routes west of Baghdad. Perhaps recognizing these same factors, Al-Qaeda had declared Ramadi the future capital of its "caliphate" in Iraq. Local Iraqi security was essentially nonexistent. Less than a hundred Iraqi police reported for duty in June, and they remained in their stations, too intimidated to patrol. Additionally, the fledgling IA brigade nearest Ramadi had little operational experience.

In late 2005, the Sunni tribes around Ramadi attempted to expel Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQIZ) after growing weary of the terrorist group's heavy-handed, indiscriminate murder and intimidation campaign.<sup>3</sup> A group calling itself the Al Anbar People's Council formed from a coalition of local Sunni sheiks and Sunni nationalist groups. The council intended to conduct an organized resistance against both coalition forces and Al-Qaeda elements, but, undermanned and hamstrung by tribal vendettas, it lacked strength and cohesion. A series of tribal leader assassinations ultimately brought down the group, which ceased to exist by February 2006. This



U.S. Army, SFC David D. Isakson

**A smoke plume caused by a terrorist attack at the government center in downtown Ramadi, Iraq, 13 March 2006.**

collapse set the conditions that the brigade found when it arrived in late May. The assassinations had created a leadership vacuum in Ramadi and, by cutting tribal ties to outside tribal centers, had isolated the city. For their part, the tribes had adopted a passive posture, not wishing to antagonize a powerful Al-Qaeda presence in and around Ramadi. In short, as the Ready First prepared to move from Tal Afar, their new AO was essentially in enemy hands.

## Actions in Summer and Autumn, 2006

The situation in Ramadi clearly required a change in coalition tactics. We had to introduce Iraqi security forces (ISF) into the city and the rural areas controlled by the enemy. But, even with a total of five Marine and Army maneuver battalion task forces, the Ready First did not have enough combat power to secure such a large city by itself. The Iraqi Army and at some point, the Iraqi Police (IP), had to be brought into play. They would help, but we understood that without the support of the local leaders and populace, any security gains achieved solely through lethal operations would be temporary at best. In particular, we had to overcome the fallout from the unsuccessful tribal uprising of 2005. We had to convince tribal leaders to rejoin the fight against Al-Qaeda.

**Developing the plan.** We reckoned the brigade had to isolate the insurgents, deny them sanctuary, and build Iraqi security forces, especially police forces, to succeed. The staff developed a plan that

*The chief of intelligence for the Marine Corps in Iraq recently filed an unusual secret report concluding that the prospects for securing that country's western Anbar province are dim and that there is almost nothing the U.S. military can do to improve the political and social situation there . . .*

—"Situation Called Dire in West Iraq," Thomas Ricks, *Washington Post*, 11 September 2006.

centered on attacking Al-Qaeda's safe havens and establishing a lasting presence there to directly challenge the insurgents' dominance of the city, disrupting their operations, attriting their numbers, and gaining the confidence of the people. We intended to take the city and its environs back one neighborhood at a time by establishing combat outposts and developing a police force in the secured neighborhoods. The plan called for simultaneously engaging local leaders in an attempt to find those who had influence, or "wasta," and to get their support. We recognized this as a critical part of the plan, because without their help, we would not be able to recruit enough police to take back the entire city.

We also realized that in the plan's initial stages, our efforts at fostering local cooperation were highly vulnerable. A concerted AQIZ attack on the supportive sheiks could quickly derail the process, as it had in 2005-2006. We therefore took some extraordinary measures to ensure the survival of tribal leaders who "flipped" to our side. We established neighborhood watches that involved deputizing screened members of internal tribal militias as "Provincial Auxiliary Iraqi Police," authorizing them to wear uniforms, carry weapons, and provide security within the defined tribal area. In the more important tribal areas, combat outposts manned by U.S. or IA forces would protect major routes and markets. In a few cases, we also planned to provide direct security to key leaders' residences, to include placing armored vehicles at checkpoints along the major access roads to their neighborhoods.

We designed our information operations (IO) efforts to alienate the people from the insurgents while increasing the prestige of supportive tribal leaders. We also made friendly sheiks the conduits



U.S. Army, CPL Sam Kilpatrick

Iraqi police recruits guard the perimeter during close-quarters combat training at the police training academy in Ramadi, Iraq, 25 September 2006.

for humanitarian aid efforts, such as free fuel disbursements. Wherever we established improved security, we established civil military operations centers (CMOCs) and began the process of restoring services to the area. After securing Ramadi General Hospital, we began an extensive effort to improve its services and to advertise it throughout the city. Prior to our operation there in early July 2006, the hospital's primary function had been treating wounded insurgents, with most citizens afraid to enter the facility. We also took a different IO tack with the sheiks. Instead of telling them that we would leave soon and they must assume responsibility for their own security, we told them that we would stay as long as necessary to defeat the terrorists. That was the message they had been waiting to hear. As long as they perceived us as mere interlopers, they dared not throw in their lot with ours. When they began to think of us as reliable partners, their attitudes began to change. Still, we had to prove that we meant what we were saying.

Experience in Tal Afar taught us that competent local police forces were vital for long-term success. An AQIZ intimidation campaign had all but eliminated the previous police force, and a suicide bomber killed dozens of potential recruits during a recruiting drive in January 2006, an event that caused recruitment to shut down for six months. In June 2006, the Ramadi IP force claimed approximately 420 police officers out of 3386 authorized, and only about 140 of these officers ever showed up to work, with less than 100 present for duty on any given day. We realized that new recruiting was the key to building an effective police force.

**Recruiting local security forces.** Our desire to recruit local Iraqis into the IP was the catalyst for the Awakening movement's birth in September 2006. The way we went about it helped to prove that we were reliable partners, that we could deliver security to the sheiks in a way that broke the cycle of Al-Qaeda murder and intimidation. In the bargain, the Government of Iraq would assume the burden of paying their tribesmen to provide their security. The situation was a winner any way you looked at it. The tribes soon saw that instead of being the hunted, they could become the hunters, with well trained, paid, and equipped security forces backed up by locally positioned coalition forces.

We began the process by shifting our recruit-

ing center to a more secure location, at one of our forward operating bases (FOBs) located closer to the tribes that had indicated a willingness to join the ISF. This shift helped to deter attacks and other forms of intimidation that had undermined previous recruiting drives. We maintained secrecy by communicating information about the recruiting drive only to sympathetic sheiks who wanted to protect tribesmen sent to join the IP. This technique resulted in a steadily growing influx of new recruits. Over the six-month period from June to December 2006, nearly 4,000 police joined without incident.

This influx taxed the brigade security forces cell, composed of the deputy commander and a small staff of highly capable officers and NCOs. The majority of the population in Al Anbar had either forged ID papers or none at all, so the recruiters had to determine the true identify and reliability of the potential recruits. Insurgent infiltration of the police force was (and still is) a problem in Iraq, and is inevitable; however, the Ready First made use of several methods and technologies to mitigate this risk.

Biometric automated tool sets (BATS) proved extremely useful in screening recruits and preventing previously caught insurgents from joining. Convincing supportive sheiks to vouch for their tribal members was a second filter in the screening process. From June to December, more than 90 percent of police recruits came from tribes supporting the Awakening, and the sheiks knew whom to trust.

*When U.S. strategy in Iraq called for pulling American forces back to large, heavily protected bases last year, Army Colonel Sean MacFarland was moving in the opposite direction. He built small, more vulnerable combat outposts in Ramadi's most dangerous neighborhoods. 'We did it where Al-Qaeda was strongest,' MacFarland says. The outposts housed U.S. troops, Iraqi security forces, and civil affairs teams. It was a risky strategy that put U.S. soldiers in daily battles with insurgents.*

—Jim Michaels, "An Army colonel's gamble pays off in Iraq," *USA Today*, 30 April 2007.

Our ISF cell understood the importance of paying the new police to prove that they were respected and their service was valued. As a collateral benefit, the growing IP force also created a small engine for economic development by providing jobs in addition to security for the local community. Each recruit received a bonus if accepted for training. Officers also received a bonus if they served as active police members for 90 days. These boosts injected more vitality into the economy.

New Iraqi Army recruits also received incentives to join. One obstacle to recruitment was that locals were hesitant to join the IA because of the possibility of receiving an assignment far from home. To mitigate this, IA Division G-1s assigned the *jundi* (junior Soldiers) to an Iraqi battalion close to their homes. This “station of choice” option helped eliminate a major constraint of recruitment possibilities for the IA.

Both Iraqi Police and IA *jundi* assigned to Ramadi were required to attend a one-week urban combat training course run by the Ready First’s field artillery unit to ensure that they could fight and survive once they joined their units. This focused training improved their confidence and discipline in urban combat, and significantly enhanced ISF effectiveness in small-unit actions. In time, the local IA brigade took responsibility for conducting the IA and IP courses with a cadre of drill sergeants, which helped forge closer bonds between the two services and instilled an increased sense of confidence in the Iraqi security forces.

The Ready First made every effort to help unqualified Iraqi recruits become police officers or soldiers. The most frequent disqualifier of recruits was the literacy requirement. The brigade commenced adult literacy classes, on a trial basis, for the illiterate recruits. These classes also had a positive, albeit unintended, collateral benefit. As security improved, hundreds of women enrolled in the classes—about five times more than we expected. The fact that women eventually felt safe enough to seek education reinforced the impression of improved security while directly attacking Al-Qaeda’s ability to influence the population.

As the benefits of cooperation with our recruiting efforts became obvious to the various local sheiks, more and more of them expressed an interest in cooperating with us. This interest eventually

resulted in an Al-Qaeda reprisal that, although tragic, was instrumental in bringing the sheiks together in the Awakening movement.

**Securing the populace.** Past coalition operations in Ramadi had originated from large FOBs on the outskirts of town, with most forces conducting “drive-by COIN” (or combat)—they exited the FOB, drove to an objective or patrolled, were attacked, exchanged fire, and returned to base. Because the physical geography and road network in Ramadi enabled the enemy to observe and predict coalition movements, nearly every movement into the center of the city was attacked multiple times by improvised explosive devices, RPGs, or small arms, often with deadly results. Moreover, the patrols played into the insurgents’ information operations campaign: Al-Qaeda exploited any collateral damage by depicting coalition Soldiers as aloof occupiers and random dispensers of violence against the populace.

It was clear that to win over the sheiks and their people, our BCT would have to move into the city and its contested areas. Thus, we decided to employ a tactic we had borrowed from the 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment and used successfully in Tal Afar: the combat outpost, or COP. Our COPs normally consisted of a tank or infantry company team based in a defensible local structure in a disputed area. Eventually, the COPs included an Iraqi Army company wherever possible as they became emboldened by our presence. Later, we began to establish Iraqi Police substations at or near the COPs as well. At this early stage, the outposts provided “lily pads” for mechanized quick-reaction forces, safe houses for special operations units, and security for civil-military operations centers. In rural areas, the COPs sometimes doubled as firebases with mortars and counterfire radars.

Because we now maintained a constant presence in disputed neighborhoods, the insurgents could no longer accurately trace and predict our actions. Frequent and random patrols out of the COPs prevented AQIZ from effectively moving and operating within the local populace. At the same time, the COPs enhanced our ability to conduct civil-military operations; intelligence, reconnaissance and surveillance (ISR); and IO.

These outposts also acted as “fly bait,” especially in the period immediately after a new COP

was established. Experience in Tal Afar taught us that insurgents would attack a newly established outpost using all systems at their disposal, including suicide car bombs. These attacks usually did not end well for the insurgents, who often suffered heavy casualties. During the establishment of the first outpost, in July 2006, the enemy mounted multiple-platoon assaults. The frenzy of attacks on the new outposts culminated in a citywide battle on 24 July 2006 in which AQIZ forces were severely beaten and sustained heavy casualties. By October, attacks were far less fierce, with elements consisting of a handful of men conducting hit-and-run type operations. These noticeable decreases in enemy strength indicated our plan to decimate their ranks was clearly working. Constant coalition presence, insurgent attrition, and loss of insurgent mobility freed the people from intimidation and sapped any support for AQIZ.

The COPs also allowed us to control the infrastructure in Ramadi and use it to once again support the populace. This was the case with the Ramadi General Hospital. We established a COP just outside the hospital's walls while an IA unit secured the premises. Within days, the hospital was providing quality medical attention for the first time in a year, and the IA was detaining wounded insurgents who had come seeking treatment.

We continued to build new outposts in the city and surrounding areas until our redeployment transition began in February 2007. The strategy was not unlike the island-hopping campaign in the Pacific during World War II. With new outposts established in an ever-tightening circle around the inner city, we wrested control of areas away from the insurgents. As areas became manageable, we handed them over to newly trained Iraqi police forces (whom we kept a watchful eye on), and used the relieved forces elsewhere to continue tightening the noose. All these developments in securing the populace required an accompanying development of key alliances with tribal leaders, the history of which is inseparable from the operational story of the Anbar Awakening.

**Courting local leaders.** Convincing the local sheiks to join us and undertake another uprising was an immense challenge, but obtaining their support was the lynchpin of the second part of our strategy. We knew it would be pivotal when we

*The police station in Ta'meen, a district of Ramadi, occupies a wreck of a building—its roof shattered by shells, its windows blown out, its walls pockmarked by shrapnel. That is not unusual in Iraq. What makes this station extraordinary is that a city in the heart of the infamous Sunni Triangle, a city that once led the anti-American insurgency, has named it after a U.S. soldier—Captain Travis Patriquin. The honor is well deserved. Captain Patriquin played a little-known, but crucial, role in one of the few American success stories of the Iraq war. He helped to convert Ramadi from one of Iraq's deadliest cities into arguably the safest outside the semi-autonomous Kurdish north. This graveyard for hundreds of American soldiers, which a Marine Corps intelligence report wrote off as a lost cause just a year ago, is where the U.S. military now takes visiting senators to show the progress it is making.*

—Martin Fletcher, "How life returned to the streets in a showpiece city that drove out Al-Qaeda" *The Times*, London, 31 August 2007.

arrived in Ramadi in June. The sheiks' memory of their first, failed attempt at establishing the Al Anbar People's Council (late 2005-early 2006) was the main obstacle to our plan in this regard. The Sunni tribal alliance was fragmented and weak compared to the growing Al-Qaeda forces that controlled Ramadi in those days.

At the same time, area tribal sheiks had no great love for U.S. forces or the Iraqi Army. Early in the

*[COL MacFarland] agreed to set up police stations in their areas, but only if the sheiks would provide 100 men to serve as police elsewhere in the city. Last year there were roughly 100 police patrolling Ramadi. Now there are about 4,000. And where there were once 4 outposts, there are 24, where Americans and Iraqis live together.*

—Tom Bowman, "U.S. Soldiers, Iraqi Police Unite to Redeem Ramadi," *NPR All Things Considered*, 22 February 2007.

insurgency, they had directly and indirectly supported former-regime nationalist insurgents against U.S. forces, and as a result they had temporarily established an alliance of convenience with AQIZ. Many tribal members were killed or captured combating coalition forces, which diminished the sheiks' ability to provide income for their tribes. These conditions in turn enabled AQIZ to recruit from those families in need of money. Another aggravating factor was that IA forces initially stationed in Anbar consisted largely of southern Iraqi Shi'ites. Ramadi area inhabitants regarded them as agents of the Sadr militia or Badr Corps, with a covert agenda to kill off Sunni tribes and enable a Shi'ite takeover of Anbar.

Nevertheless, the tribal leaders were still fed up with Al Qaeda's violence and frustrated by their own loss of prestige and influence in their traditional heartlands. The brigade staff believed that by offering convincing incentives, we could create a tribal alliance that could produce lasting security in Ramadi. To persuade the tribes to cooperate, we first needed to understand the human terrain in our AO, and that task fell to an outstanding and talented junior officer, Captain Travis Patriquin.

An Arabic-speaking former Special Forces Soldier and an infantry officer assigned as the Ready First's S-9/engagements officer, Patriquin coordinated brigade-level local meetings and discussions. He quickly gained the sheiks' confidence through his language and interpersonal skills and developed strong personal bonds with their families. He strengthened these bonds during meetings between the brigade commander or deputy commanding officer and the sheiks. Battalion and company commanders also worked on improving relations with the townspeople on a daily basis. Thus, the sheiks' growing trust of the brigade's officers led them to support our efforts to reinvigorate police recruiting.

The combined effects of the engagement efforts were eventually hugely successful. However, some staff officers outside the brigade became concerned that we were arming a tribal militia that would fight against Iraqi security forces in the future. To allay those concerns and to pass on the "best practices" we had developed in Ramadi, Captain Patriquin created his now-famous PowerPoint stick-figure presentation "How to Win in Al Anbar."<sup>6</sup> This slideshow perfectly captured the Ready First's concept for winning the tribes over to our side.

We deliberately placed our first IP stations manned with newly recruited Sunni tribesmen where they could protect the tribes that were supplying us with additional recruits. This tactic gave the IPs added incentive to stand and fight and effectively ended Al-Qaeda's murder and intimidation campaign against the men serving in the ISF. In a significant change of circumstance, the newly minted IPs quickly became the hunters, arresting a number of insurgents and uncovering tremendous weapons caches. By the end of July 2006, AQIZ was definitely feeling the pinch.

In reacting to the pressure, Al-Qaeda inadvertently aided our efforts by overplaying its hand. The group launched a series of attacks against the new IP stations. On 21 August, the insurgents attacked a newly established IP station in a tribal stronghold with an immense suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED). The IPs, however, refused to be scared away. Despite offers of safe haven at a nearby coalition base, the survivors remained at their posts, ran their tattered flag back up the flagpole, and even began to conduct patrols again that same day.

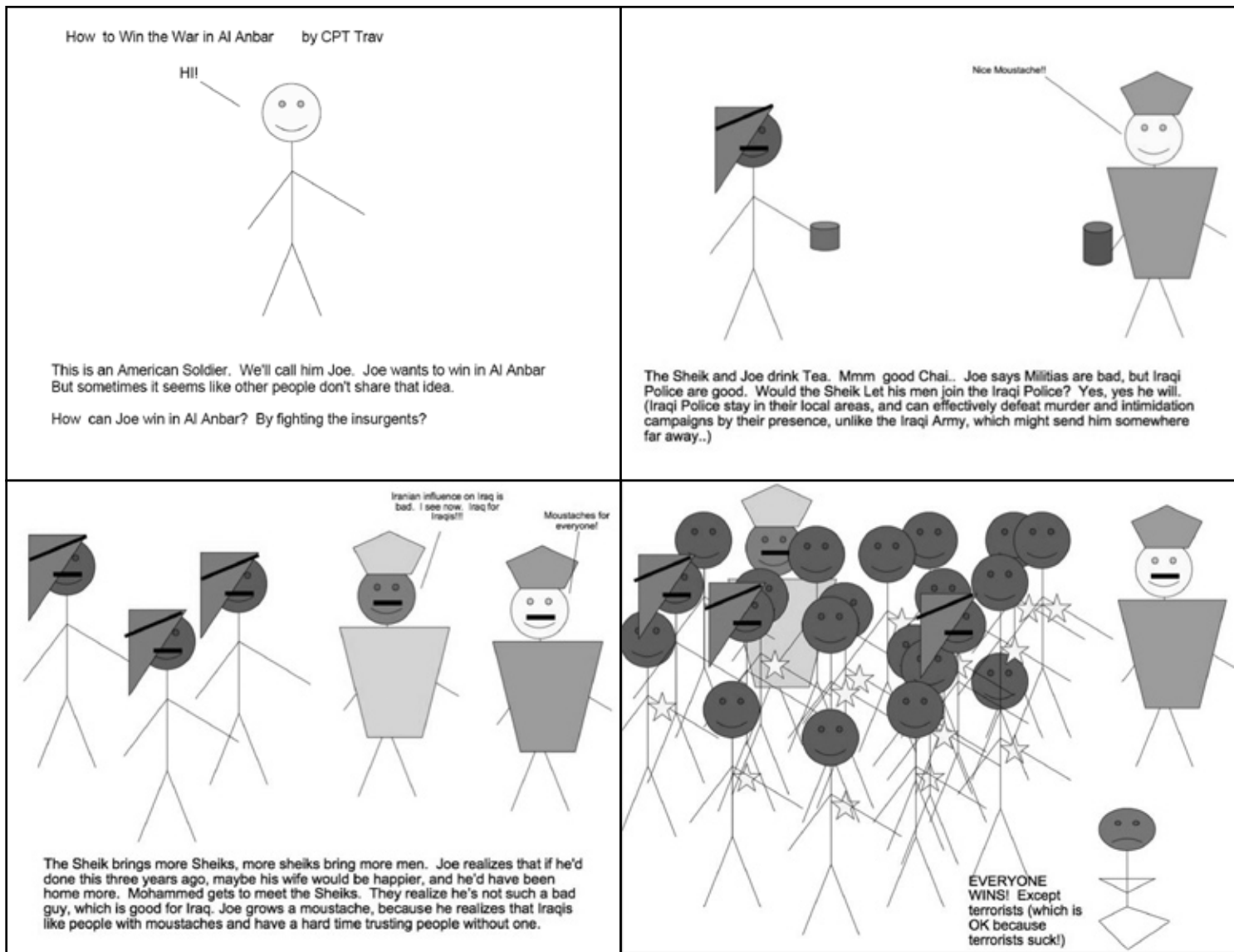
Hours later, Al-Qaeda attempted to intimidate future recruits by murdering and desecrating the body of a leading local sheik who had been instrumental in our early push at recruiting tribe members into the ISF. The attack inflamed tribal sentiment against AQIZ and drove several fence-sitting tribes to support our police recruitment.

A significant leader for the burgeoning movement emerged in Sittar albu-Risha, a younger sheik who resided on the west side of town and who was reputed to have smuggling and business connections throughout Anbar. In addition to having questions about Sittar's true motives, some were concerned that we would be placing too much stock in a relatively junior sheik and undercutting ongoing negotiations with Anbar tribal leaders who had fled to Jordan. However, with each successful negotiation and demonstration of trustworthiness by Sittar, we were able to whittle away at these reservations.

## The Tipping Point

Sheik Sittar was a dynamic figure willing to stand up to Al Qaeda. Other, more cautious, sheiks were happy to let him walk point for the anti-AQIZ





Selected slides from the PowerPoint presentation created by Captain Travis Patriquin. On 6 December 2006, Captain Patriquin was killed in action in Ramadi by an IED. Numerous sheiks attended his memorial service.

tribes in the early days, when victory was far from certain and memories of earlier failed attempts were still fresh. In *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell writes that three types of individuals are necessary for a radical change, or a “tipping point,” to occur: mavens, salespersons, and connectors. In brief, mavens have the goods, salespersons spread the word, and connectors distribute the goods far and wide.<sup>7</sup> In Ramadi, the Soldiers of the Ready First were the mavens who had the goods—in this case, the ability to form, train, and equip ISF and new leaders. The brigade and battalion commanders acted as salesmen. We identified Sittar as a connector who could get the people to buy into

the Awakening. All the elements were in place for transformation; we only had to decide if we trusted Sittar. When our salesmen decided to take a risk with this connector, the effect was amazing in its speed and reach.

On 9 September 2006 Sittar organized a tribal council, attended by over 50 sheiks and the brigade commander, at which he declared the “Anbar Awakening” officially underway. The Awakening Council that emerged from the meeting agreed to first drive AQIZ from Ramadi, and then reestablish rule of law and a local government to support the people. The creation of the Awakening Council, combined with the ongoing recruitment of local

*A power struggle has erupted: al-Qaeda's reign of terror is being challenged. Sheikh Sittar and many of his fellow tribal leaders have cast their lot with the once-reviled U.S. military. They are persuading hundreds of their followers to sign up for the previously defunct Iraqi police. American troops are moving into a city that was, until recently, a virtual no-go area. A battle is raging for the allegiance of Ramadi's battered and terrified citizens and the outcome could have far-reaching consequences.*

—Martin Fletcher, "Fighting back: the city determined not to become al-Qaeda's capital,"  
*The Times*, London, 20 November 2006.

security forces, began a snowball effect that resulted in a growing number of tribes either openly supporting the Awakening or withdrawing their support from AQIZ.

Although recruiting and establishing the neighborhood watch units was an important and necessary step to securing Ramadi, it was not sufficient to remove AQIZ influence in the city completely. We needed more police officers who would join us inside the city, which our Soldiers called "the heart of darkness." A critical agreement emerging from the council resulted in commitments to provide more recruits from local tribes to fill out requirements for police forces.

Soon after the council ended, tribes began an independent campaign of eradication and retaliation against AQIZ members living among them. Al-Qaeda's influence in the city began to wane quickly. U.S. and Iraqi units operating from COPs killed or captured AQIZ's most effective elements while resurgent IP and tribal forces raided their caches and safe houses. By late October, nearly every tribe in the northern and western outskirts of Ramadi had publically declared support for the Awakening, and tribes in the dangerous eastern outskirts of the city were sending out feelers about doing the same. The stage was set for a major change in Ramadi.

## The Battle of Sufia

AQIZ did not sit idly as it slowly lost its dominance of both the terrain and the populace. Attacks

remained high through October 2006 (Ramadan) inside the city limits while SVBIED attacks against and harassment of new COPs and IP stations located outside the city occurred regularly. These attacks often inflicted casualties on the nascent security forces. Casualties were not enough to slow the Awakening, however, and support continued to expand for the movement.

AQIZ long counted on a secure support base on the east outskirts of town in the Sufia and Julaybah areas. These rural tribal areas were some of the most dangerous in the Ramadi AO, and intelligence indicated they harbored a large support network for the insurgents operating inside the city. AQIZ learned that one of the major sheiks of the Sufia area was considering supporting the Awakening and that he had erected checkpoints to keep out insurgents. Facing a threat to its vital support areas outside of town, AQIZ acted quickly to maintain its grip there.

On 25 November, 30 to 40 gunmen in cars drove into the Albu Soda tribal area and began murdering members of the tribe. AQIZ forces took the tribal militiamen attempting to defend their homes by surprise, killing many while looting and burning their homes. A group of civilians fled in boats across the Euphrates River and reached an Iraqi Army outpost where they breathlessly described what was happening. The IA battalion relayed the information to our brigade TOC, where the operations staff reallocated ISR platforms and immediately called for Captain Patriquin to provide an Iraqi account of the situation.

Within an hour, Patriquin had gained an understanding of the situation through phone calls to the local sheiks. The brigade headquarters quickly made a crucial decision—we would support the Albu Soda tribe in defending itself. The BCT commanders and staff cancelled a planned battalion-sized combined operation in east Ramadi that was just hours from execution. The battalion commander who was responsible for that area, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Ferry of 1st Battalion, 9th Infantry (Manchus), quickly diverted his force away from the planned operations to assist the Soda tribe in defending its homes. The decision was immediate and the response rapid, underscoring the brigade's flexibility in recognizing and adapting quickly to take advantage of opportunities, rather than following plans in lockstep.



Armed militants drive through Ramadi, Iraq, 5 December 2006.

U.S. Marine Corps aircraft arrived overhead to perform “show of force” sorties designed to intimidate the insurgents and convince them that air attack was imminent. Next, a ground reaction force from Task Force 1-9 Infantry began preparations to move to the area and establish defenses for the Albu Soda tribe. Because we were viewing the area using aerial sensors, our vision of the fight was indistinct, and we were unable to separate insurgents from the friendly tribesmen. We did not want to attack the friendly tribe by mistake, so we undertook actions to intimidate the insurgents by firing “terrain denial” missions. Explosions in empty nearby fields raised the possibility of suppressive artillery fire in the minds of the enemy. Complemented by the roar of fighter jets, the startled AQIZ forces became convinced that massive firepower was bearing down on them. They started to withdraw, separating themselves from their victims.

As AQIZ gunmen began fleeing the area, they loaded into several cars, three of which our sensors identified. Our UAV observed a body dragging behind one of the cars, evidently an Albu Soda tribesman. The insurgents obviously meant to terrorize and insult the tribe through this act of mutilation, but they also triggered a boomerang reaction by clearly identifying themselves. The

Ready First TOC coordinated F-18 attacks that overtook and destroyed the fleeing vehicles in a blazing fury as M1A1 tanks maneuvered to engage. Armed Predator UAVs and M1A1 tanks in ambush positions finished off others attempting to escape. In the end, the Al Qaeda forces suffered far more casualties than the Albu Soda tribe. By nightfall, several companies of infantry and some M1A1 tanks had reinforced tribal defenders, further demonstrating coalition commitment.

Once again, AQIZ’s intimidation attempt spectacularly backfired: tribes joined the Awakening movement at a rate that proved difficult to keep up with, even expanding into the neighboring Fallujah and Hit AOs. Within

two months, every tribe in Sufia and Julaybah had declared support for the Awakening, and four new combat outposts had been constructed to secure the populations. An area previously deemed high threat and used as a staging ground for AQIZ mortar attacks became almost completely secure. Tribal

*While Al-Qaida has been driven from the city, it has not been driven from Anbar Province, nor from Iraq. But Ramadi—which the Marines thought in August 2006 was fully under control of the insurgents, is THE example of Iraqi-American co-operation. There is an economic boom taking place: there are rebuilding projects; the porcelain factory is re-opening next month, shops are re-opening, and better-quality food and goods are for sale in the markets—and salaries have risen 20 percent in the last six months. For as Mayor Latif Obaid said to me in April when I attended his 3rd Economic Development Conference, Ramadi is open for business—come visit us!*

—Andrew Lubin, “Ramadi: Building on Success,”  
*On Point*, 30 October 2007.

members inside Ramadi began supporting the Awakening as well, and security rapidly improved. Once a tribal area joined the Awakening, enemy contact in those areas typically dropped to near zero, as IP, IA, and U.S. forces provided security. Bases once under daily mortar and small arms attacks became secure areas and transitioned to IP control, freeing U.S. forces to pursue AQIZ elsewhere.

Overall, by February 2007, contacts with insurgents dropped almost 70 percent compared to the numbers in June 2006, and they had dramatically decreased in complexity and effect. The combination of tribal engagement and combat outposts had proved toxic to AQIZ's efforts to dominate Ramadi.

## Rebuilding

Clearing and holding are the bloody but relatively straightforward part of any counterinsurgency effort; building the infrastructure to sustain military success is the complicated part. In Ramadi, it was essential to begin building at the beginning of a clearing operation, so there would not be a gap between establishing security and implementing projects.

While civil affairs projects are obviously vital to the success of a clear, hold, build campaign, building human infrastructure, which includes installing government officials and agency directors, is just as vital. One of the keys to success in Tal Afar was the establishment of a credible local government with a mayor respected by the populace. In Ramadi, there was no local governance when we arrived. We prevailed upon the provincial council to appoint a mayor—one acceptable to the tribes—to coordinate development for the city. This appointment was important because it relieved the governor of municipal level duties and allowed him to focus on issues elsewhere in the province. We then worked with the mayor to ensure that schools, hospitals, sewers, power stations, and other infrastructure all returned to pre-war normalcy as soon as possible. In fact, the western part of Ramadi was undergoing redevelopment even while combat operations in east Ramadi continued during autumn. This rebuilding effort demonstrated that normal services could function again and helped convince the people of Ramadi that local security improvements were permanent.

We wanted to encourage people living in still-embattled neighborhoods that joining the Awakening was both possible and in their best interest. To that end, we held the first “Ramadi Reconstruction Conference” in January 2007 at Sheik Sittar's home. Sheik Sittar invited all of the local sheiks, any government officials we could find, and local contractors. Following a brief on all ongoing projects, we explained the different ways coalition forces could be of assistance in reconstruction. The participants broke down into geographically based small groups, led by our five maneuver task force commanders and their local partners, to design and refine plans for reconstruction. The commanders discussed local needs and, just as importantly, local reconstruction capabilities. Everyone was asked to return in March to brief plans. Accordingly, we were able to begin reconstruction in cleared parts of Ramadi before the fighting was over elsewhere. Maintaining the initiative in this way was the single most important thing we did throughout the campaign.

## Why We Succeeded

Clearly, a combination of factors, some of which we may not yet fully understand, contributed to this pivotal success. As mentioned before, the enemy overplayed its hand and the people were tired of Al-Qaeda. A series of assassinations had elevated younger, more aggressive tribal leaders to positions of influence. A growing concern that the U.S. would leave Iraq and leave the Sunnis defenseless against Al-Qaeda and Iranian-supported militias made these younger leaders open to our overtures. Our willingness to adapt our plans based on the advice of the sheiks, our staunch and timely support for them in times of danger and need, and our ability to deliver on our promises convinced them that they could do business with us. Our forward presence kept them reassured. We operated aggressively across all lines of operation, kinetic and non-kinetic, to bring every weapon and asset at our disposal to bear against the enemy. We conducted detailed intelligence fusion and targeting meetings and operated seamlessly with special operations forces, aviation, close air support, and riverine units. We have now seen this model followed by other BCTs in other parts of Iraq, and it has proved effective. Indeed, the level of sophistication has only improved since the Ready First departed in February 2007. Although, perhaps

*This is news the world doesn't hear: Ramadi, long a hotbed of unrest, a city that once formed the southwestern tip of the notorious "Sunni Triangle," is now telling a different story, a story of Americans who came here as liberators, became hated occupiers and are now the protectors of Iraqi reconstruction.*

—Ullrich Fichtner, "Hope and Despair in Divided Iraq,"  
*Der Spiegel*, 10 August 2007.

groundbreaking at the time, most of our tactics, techniques, and procedures are now familiar to any unit operating in Iraq today.

The most enduring lessons of Ramadi are ones that are most easily lost in technical and tactical discussions, the least tangible ones. The most important lessons we learned were—

- Accept risk in order to achieve results.
- Once you gain the initiative, never give the enemy respite or refuge.
- Never stop looking for another way to attack the enemy.
- The tribes represent the people of Iraq, and the populace represents the "key terrain" of the conflict. The force that supports the population by taking the moral high ground has as sure an advantage in COIN as a maneuver commander who occupies dominant terrain in a conventional battle.

No matter how imperfect the tribal system appeared to us, it was capable of providing social order and control through culturally appropriate means where governmental control was weak.

## Conclusion

The men assigned and attached to the Ready First paid a terrible price for securing Ramadi. In nine months, 85 of our Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines were killed, and over 500 wounded in some of the toughest fighting of the war. Only the remarkable results they achieved, and the liberated citizens of Ramadi who can now walk the streets without fear, temper the grief caused by their sacrifice. It is gratifying to see our model adapted and used elsewhere in the War on Terror. It proves once again that America's Army is truly a learning organization. In the end, probably the most important lesson we learned in Ramadi was that, as General Petraeus said, "Hard is not hopeless." **MR**

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### NOTES

1. Frederick W. Kagan, "The Gettysburg of This War," *National Review*, 3 Sep 2007.
2. Megan K. Stack and Louise Roug, "Fear of Big Battle Panics Iraqi City," *Los Angeles Times*, 11 June 2006.
3. For the purposes of this essay, the multiple insurgent groups are broken into two main categories: former regime elements (FRE), consisting of former Baathists and other nationalists, and Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQIZ), consisting of Islamic fundamentalist insurgent groups.
4. The "How to Win in Al Anbar" presentation became famous quickly, even gaining mention on several news talk shows. It can be downloaded at <[http://abcnews.go.com/images/us/how\\_to\\_win\\_in\\_anbar\\_v4.pdf](http://abcnews.go.com/images/us/how_to_win_in_anbar_v4.pdf)>.
5. Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2000).

*This article is dedicated to the members of the Ready First Combat Team who lost their lives to make Iraq a better place and to the tens of thousands of other Soldiers and Marines who are still in the fight.*

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