

# COUNTERINSURGENCY LESSONS FROM IRAQ

Bing West

**T**HE MILITARY WAR in Iraq ended in 2008, although political conflict among Sunnis, Shi'ites, and Kurds will continue for decades. At the same time, the war in Afghanistan has heated up, with more American troops committed to battle. This article, based on 15 extended trips I made to Iraq and interviews I conducted with 2,000 Soldiers and Marines, reviews the causes of the turnaround in Iraq and their importance for doctrine development and for success in the war in Afghanistan.

## A Two-Front War Imperiled

From 2003 through 2008, two separate fronts accounted for about two-thirds of all American fatalities. In the west, the Sunni province of Anbar emerged as the heartland of a sectarian resistance that was gradually taken over by Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Anbar accounted for 42 percent of all U.S. fatalities in Iraq from 2004 through 2006.<sup>1</sup>

To the east, the Baghdad region accounted for 27 percent of the fatalities in 2004-2006.<sup>2</sup> It increased to 44 percent in 2007.<sup>3</sup> Violence in and around Baghdad erupted in the spring of 2004, then subsided inside the capital city in 2005. U.S. brigades pulled out of the city during this false lull. However, behind the scenes, the Shi'ite militias were conniving with the Ministry of Interior and the police to create death squads. When those squads surged out of the Shi'ite strongholds in Baghdad in early 2006, U.S. forces were caught out of position, while the Shi'ite-controlled government was both unwilling and unable to support a joint effort to restore order.

So by mid-2006, the coalition was losing on both fronts. In Anbar, according to an on-scene assessment, Al-Qaeda controlled the population. In Baghdad, a civil war was raging and the Sunnis were being driven from their homes. Yet, a year later the tide of war was flowing in the coalition's favor. What happened? Two events changed the course of the war: the 2006 Sunni Awakening in Anbar and the 2007 surge in Baghdad. The Awakening was the critical enabler for success of the surge.

## The Awakening on the Western Front

A combat veteran once wrote, "There is a vast difference in the perception of wartime events in histories and documents written later."<sup>4</sup> According to a later narrative that has achieved mythical status, in 2007 President Bush surged five brigades, enabling General Petraeus to implement counterinsurgency tactics that won the war. A *Washington Post* columnist referred



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PHOTO: House-clearing squad in Fallujah, Iraq, November 2004.

*All photos courtesy of author*

# Report Documentation Page

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to Petraeus as the “Savior of Anbar.”<sup>5</sup> Such myths encourage over-simplified, wrong-headed theories about a similar tribal uprising in Afghanistan. The facts about Anbar are more complicated.

Throughout the war, Anbar was an economy of force operation. In 2005, the 22,000 Marines and 5,000 Soldiers in Multi-National Force West (MNF-W), under the operational control of the Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF), accounted for one-fifth of U.S. forces in Iraq and two-fifths of the casualties. Anbar, according to conventional wisdom a vast land occupied by truculent tribes, would be the last province to be pacified.

A rocky road led to the Awakening. In early 2004, several key Anbar sheiks agreed to support the fledgling Iraqi government, but then refused to send their tribesmen to training centers north of Baghdad. Anbaris, they declared, would not leave Anbar. Then in May of 2004, the MEF rashly allowed local insurgents to form the so-called “Fallujah Brigade” in order to control the city of Fallujah. Al-Qaeda quickly took over, forcing 10 U.S. battalions to return in late 2004 to retake the city, amidst much destruction.

Starting in late 2005, the MEF deployed about 40 company-sized combat bases in a clear-and-hold strategy to control six cities and the surrounding farmlands. But this yielded only grudging gains and steady casualties. Several tentative offers by Sunnis to raise their own militias were firmly rejected. In early 2006, the sheiks in Ramadi did agree that their followers could join the Iraqi Army and police force. Al-Qaeda responded by murdering several sheiks and killing over 50 recruits. Things looked bleak in Anbar, while to the east, Baghdad was falling apart. In Washington, many in the press and the administration believed the war was lost.

Then in September of 2006, Sheik Abu Risha Sattar declared a tribal rebellion against Al-Qaeda. Sattar’s initiative, supported by Colonel Sean McFarland, was the third try by Sunnis to throw off Al-Qaeda’s yoke. This time, the effort caught hold, due mainly to Sattar’s dynamism. His rallying cry touched a responsive nerve among the population and legitimized a hundred bottom-up partnerships among local leaders (Iraqi battalion commanders, police chiefs, and tribal leaders) and U.S. commanders at battalion level and below. The Awakening de-legitimized the tribal members

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who were attacking Americans or were affiliated with Al-Qaeda.

In a brilliant analysis, Jonathan Schroden of the Center for Naval Analyses detailed how the insurgents lost the initiative. Incidents of violence in Anbar plummeted from over 450 per month in late 2006 to fewer than 100 by mid-2007.<sup>6</sup> U.S. fatalities in Anbar fell from 43 percent of the total in 2006 to 17 percent in 2007.<sup>7</sup> From late 2006 onwards, coalition and Iraqi forces initiated a majority of the contacts in Anbar.<sup>8</sup> The number of tips from the citizens, sensing Al-Qaeda was being driven out, skyrocketed, while Sunni recruits for the police and the army (with assurances of assignment inside Anbar) exceeded the number of openings.<sup>9</sup>

Other factors contributed to this success. The city of Haditha swung over because a special operations team brought back a tough police chief whose tribe was resented but feared by the locals, and because an earth berm was thrown up around the city, restricting all vehicles.

Iraq was the world’s first large-scale, vehicular-borne insurgency. Al-Qaeda, Sunni resistance gangs, and Shi’ite death squads all traveled in packs



**The late Sheik Abu Risha Sattar, leader of the Awakening, in Ramadi, September 2007.**

of cars. Their mobility was taken away by erecting concrete walls that sealed off neighborhoods. Although this forced residents to carry food on their backs or queue up for tedious vehicle searches, it did restrict entry by outsiders. If Al-Qaeda fighters stayed inside the walls, they risked betrayal.

The capital of Anbar, Ramadi, was pacified by an American battalion commander and a police chief supported by his own tribe, vying with Sattar. Ramadi was taken back piece by piece, with barricades erected and police precincts fortified as they were reclaimed. Stubborn Fallujah finally quieted down due to a combination of a fierce police chief who had himself once been an insurgent, newly constructed barricades, Sunni neighborhood watches, and constant patrolling by American squads.

The greatest contribution of Sattar's tribal alliance occurred outside the cities, through the process of "draining the swamp." Thousands of kilometers of lush farmlands and dense undergrowth had enabled Al-Qaeda to rest and refit in the safety of that cover and concealment. But once the tribes turned, those scattered Al-Qaeda hiding places were gradually identified. The environs of Habbineah, midway between Ramadi and Fallujah, succumbed to American and Iraqi battalions in late 2006, after tribal members pointed out the Al-Qaeda sympathizers. In 2007, the surge strategy infused another 2,000 troops into the Tharthar region of northeast Anbar. While this was a helpful clean-up measure, the war in Anbar had already been won. The dominant variable that led to success on the western front was the change of sentiment within the Sunni population.

## **The Surge on the Eastern Front**

The nascent change in Sunni attitude was dimly appreciated in Washington during the fall of 2006. The National Security Council staff, independent of a lethargic Pentagon, crafted a strategy to change the dynamic of a war that seemed on the verge of being lost. Surging more troops, the NSC staff believed, would signal that Bush was determined to prevail.

By mid-December of 2006, Lieutenant General Raymond Odierno, who had just taken over as III Corps commander, had decided on a two-pronged "gap strategy" for the eastern front. He would use about half the troops of the surge to flush Al-Qaeda from the farmlands that ringed Baghdad. The other half would join U.S. forces already inside Baghdad

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and protect the population, filling the gap caused by the absence of Iraqi security forces. Odierno and Petraeus, who would not take over until February, put on a full-court press aimed at the Pentagon to ensure they would receive five additional brigades.

As in Anbar during 2006, a pattern of bottom-up partnerships emerged in the east during 2007, shaped by four decisions at the top. As mentioned, the first two were Bush's surge and Odierno's deployment of troops in belts around Baghdad and inside the capital.

The third important decision was Petraeus' focus on protecting the population. He told me he looked for a few "big ideas" to give direction and cogency to the actions of 130,000 coalition troops. Two of these big ideas were "Don't commute to work" and "Partner with the Iraqis." He moved Soldiers out of the large bases and into Baghdad neighborhoods, especially along the fault lines where Sunnis were being driven out or where Al-Qaeda was in control. Al-Qaeda fought back against this new 24-hour presence, as evinced by the fact that the Baghdad region now accounted for 44 percent of all U.S. fatalities in 2007 as Soldiers cleared and held neighborhood after neighborhood.<sup>10</sup>

The fourth good decision was Petraeus using the Awakening as the lever to flip the war. In February of 2007, he visited Ramadi and was impressed by the thousands of Sunnis joining tribal "emergency response units." He authorized U.S. commanders across Iraq to recruit similar irregular forces. This happened only after and because U.S. company-sized outposts were set up throughout Baghdad and the surrounding belts of farmlands. By 2008, U.S. battalions were paying 90,000 Iraqis, mostly Sunnis,

***Petraeus...[used] the Awakening as the lever to flip the war.***

who had volunteered for neighborhood watch groups called the Sons of Iraq. Al-Qaeda fled and Shi'ite death squad attacks greatly diminished.

In 2007, in Shi'ite areas under militia control like Sadr City, the population did not dare accept American protection. While using the special operations forces (SOF) to arrest the top militia leaders, Petraeus initially left those Shi'ite areas to Prime Minister Maliki to deal with. In mid-2008, Maliki impetuously attacked Sadr's militia in Basra. Fighting spread also to Sadr City. Petraeus dispatched U.S. Special Forces, intelligence assets, and close air support to aid the Iraqi Army. Sadr's militia suffered heavy losses, with many of its leaders fleeing to Iran.

In his book *The War Within*, Bob Woodward claims the turnaround was due largely to SOF with a super-secret device that attrited Al-Qaeda leadership.<sup>11</sup> With authority to operate wherever it chose in Iraq, SOF did achieve remarkable results, accounting for the death or capture of perhaps 70 percent of high value targets. But, had it not been for the combat outposts, police precincts, and security forces among the population—the essence of the Petraeus/Odierno operational strategy—Al-Qaeda could continuously replace its losses. SOF were necessary, but they were not the critical factor. In sum, on both the western and eastern fronts, deploying American troops among the population and forging bottom-up partnerships with Iraqi battalions, police, and Sunni neighborhood groups—including former insurgents—turned the war around.

## Implications for Doctrine

Success on the ground validated the doctrinal keystone of protecting the population. Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, goes much further, however. It states that “Soldiers and Marines are expected to be nation builders as well as warriors rebuilding infrastructure and basic services...[to] facilitate establishing local governance and the rule of law.”<sup>12</sup> The fundamental problem with that expectation is that it is written as if U.S. commanders had the authority or power to persuade the host nation's leaders to carry out benevolent Western tenets. But



Skirmish in Adamiah district of Baghdad, August 2007.

we are not colonialists with power to accomplish those tasks. Instead, we gave back sovereignty in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Our Soldiers cannot build those nations. With limited leverage, they can only advise.

The companion to FM 3-24, FM 3-07 *Stability Operations*, also stresses nation building, economic development, good governance, and delivery of services, especially SWET (sewers, water, electricity, and trash removal).<sup>13</sup> It also emphasizes security “based on democratic norms and underpinned by international human rights principles.”<sup>14</sup>

While these are laudable, are they necessary for military success?

## Economic Development Oversold

Field Manual 3-24 followed in the tradition of David Galula. While at Harvard in 1962, Galula, a retired French officer, wrote a treatise on counterinsurgency in Algeria. Galula's slim book advocated Rousseau's philosophy of government, asserting that an insurgency is defeated when the government protects the population and remedies its complaints.

Galula did not address the fact that an insurgency is usually defeated by controlling—not protecting—the population. In 1921, the British did not protect the Irish population from the Irish Republican Army.

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Rather, the Irish population reviled the British forces. The goal of Great Britain was to control the Irish, not to protect them. Similarly, Galula's theory would not have enabled the French to maintain control in either Vietnam or Algeria, because the insurgents there wanted freedom from the French.

Chinese farmers in Malaya in the 1950s were fenced in during the insurgency, not wooed with economic projects. The Viet Cong were largely defeated by 1970, while the vast majority of South Vietnamese remained subsistence farmers, bereft of economic aid and free electric power. But because Galula conjoins military power with benevolent service to the people, his theory accords with Western liberal political thought, regardless of actual historical events.

Similar to Galula's achievement in persuading academics, the theories espoused in FM 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, persuaded the mainstream media that General Petraeus's forthcoming campaign in



“Sons of Iraq” near Taji, July 2008.

Baghdad was righteous. The FM appealed to liberals because it posited the concept of war without blood. Enemies were converted rather than killed. It was the only FM ever accorded a *New York Times* book review, written by a Harvard professor.

The proselytizing strength of the FM, however, was its operational weakness. In terms similar to Galula's economic determinism, both the counterinsurgency and stability operations FMs argued that if a government dispensed to a population projects, money, and free services—along with security—then the people would reciprocate by rejecting an insurgency's cause, be it political, religious, or nationalistic. In Iraq, every American brigade began to work along four lines of operation: economy, governance, security, and services. Together, these four lines, undertaken by Soldiers and Marines who had volunteered and had been trained for only the security mission, comprised “nation building.”

In fact, economic development played a scant role. The U.S. spent more than \$50 billion on reconstruction projects that produced no enduring change in popular opinion.<sup>15</sup> The brigades dispensed another \$3 billion through the Commanders' Emergency Response Program with the intent to buy or lease local goodwill, which would work against the insurgents. General Peter Chiarelli wrote an article for *Military Review* arguing that when U.S. Soldiers dug sewers in Sadr City in late 2004, U.S. casualties fell.<sup>16</sup> But the increase in sewers or other services did not prevent the militia from killing Americans in subsequent years.

In Iraq, provincial reconstruction teams have become proficient at the district level, and brigade commanders point with pride to flourishing markets. There is a role for such undertakings because our military is not uncaring, not because economic development is essential for a military campaign. The Pentagon, however, has reached a different conclusion, stressing a deepening investment in development and urging that other government agencies—the State Department, USAID, the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Energy, et al.—be attached to the brigades without questioning whether the fundamental goal—handing out free goods—achieves its intent of winning hearts and minds. The military should rigorously analyze what value reconstruction teams add to its mission accomplishment, and at what level of funding.

## No Rule of Law

Our doctrine calls for “the rule of law,” but does not define the term. Iraq was the first insurgency where the number of insurgents captured vastly exceeded the number killed. In 2003-2004, we locked up many of the wrong people and antagonized hundreds of thousands. By 2006, we had veered the other way, releasing too many who were guilty. Four out of five detainees were released within a few days. Of those sent to jail, the average length of imprisonment was less than a year. The troops resented the resulting “catch and release” system.

By 2008, the U.S. military had a practical system for sorting out the 15,000 or more prisoners in American custody. At least 5,000 were judged too dangerous to be released. We couldn’t risk handing them over to a corrupt and intimidated Iraq judiciary system with a 95 percent release rate. It is meaningless to enshrine the rule of law as doctrine and not dare to trust it in practice. We failed to institute a rule of law in Iraq because we lacked the authority.

The rule of law is a mess in terms of rulings by the American as well as the Iraqi judiciary. Within the U.S. Congress and the Supreme Court, there was no consensus about what to do with men in civilian clothes who killed American Soldiers. The 200-odd prisoners held in Guantanamo were accorded rights similar to American citizens charged with crimes inside the U.S. But no one wanted to extend that ruling to the thousands we held in Iraq and Afghanistan.

American officials are pressing rule of law upon non-Western countries when we cannot define it for ourselves. In these circumstances, any enemy who wears a uniform while fighting us is foolish. He gains many advantages by posing as a civilian.

## Nation Building Remains an Open Issue

The FMs argue that we must build a democratic nation in our image in order to quell an insurgency. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has said an insurgency cannot be defeated by killing the insurgents, indicating that nation building is the solution.

In Iraq, the war is over, but nation building remains a work in progress, with our diplomats trying to moderate the Shi’ite preference for a tyranny of the democratic majority. Ironically, our commanders in Iraq are the ombudsmen for the Sunnis who earlier had opposed them. How Sunni-Shi’ite relations evolve will have less to do with us with each passing year, given the new, stringent Status of Forces Agreement.

Few people change character in middle age. Our advisers dealt with middle-aged officers who were crooks and incompetents before the war, including one Iraqi Defense Minister who stole hundreds of millions of dollars. Our doctrine offered scant advice about how to root out thievery or a reluctance to close with the enemy.

An effective host-nation military rests on the selection of good leaders. The Marine Corps *Small Wars Manual*, a counterinsurgency classic, stipulated that American NCOs would choose the leaders of the host-nation gendarmerie. In Vietnam, Special Forces A teams and the Marine combined action platoons exerted significant influence in selecting local leaders. Galula insisted that “the most important function of the counterinsurgents, an indispensable step toward consolidating their gains, is to select new leaders from among the population.”<sup>17</sup>

The dilemma the American military never resolved was reconciling its ethics with the behavior of those it put in power. Colonel Juan Ayala, after serving as the senior adviser to the 1st Iraqi Division, wrote: “Corruption exists. The Iraqis know that we know. *They know we would never condone it or report it if we saw it.* Never overt, the rank and file complain about it... It can’t be viewed through American eyes. It has been part of life since the sands of Mesopotamia... Seeking corruption would distract mission focus, severely strain sensitive personal relations, and worse, compromise our force protection posture (meaning there would be retaliation).”<sup>18</sup>

General John Abizaid, then commander of Central Command, strongly disagreed with the colonel. Testifying before the Senate, Abizaid said, “Corruption in this part of the world is one of the great corrosive

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influences that causes extremism to flourish.” Yet the senior generals never issued clear guidelines, leaving advisers not knowing how to deal with the sleaze and corruption they routinely encountered.<sup>19</sup>

When the United States first set up the host government, joint review boards for military officers could have been established. Instead, mesmerized by the word “sovereignty,” we gave away our leverage over promotions in and thus the competency of the Iraqi Army. Our military should have a formal role in the military promotion system in any host nation that would not exist if Americans were not fighting and dying to sustain its sovereignty.

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## **Perseverance on the Battlefield**

Odierno and Petraeus skillfully orchestrated the deployments of the surge forces. The critical precondition was that the Sunnis were predisposed to greet the surge troops positively in 2007. This had not been the case in 2004. Al-Qaeda, resembling Robespierre’s terror in 1792 France, had killed too many sheiks, empowered the criminal class, and antagonized the Sunni population. But as those tribes were not strong enough to push out Al-Qaeda, they turned to the strongest tribe then present in Iraq—the American military.

What were our Soldiers and Marines doing on the ground? It is one thing to assign a battalion to a battlespace; it is quite another to specify its tasks. Estimating a workable troop-to-task ratio is only a first-order approximation. What counts is what Soldiers can actually do once on the ground, and with what frequency.

There was no standard format for battalion operations. Although discussions with tribes, Iraqi soldiers, and police were constant, some U.S. battalions patrolled alone, some arranged set times for joint operations, and a few operated exclusively alongside Iraqis. Casualties varied among battalions, usually ranging from 5 to 30 KIA and from

80 to 300 WIA during a tour. The rough rule of thumb was that every Soldier or Marine in a line unit patrolled outside the wire at least once a day. Many units cycled between internal guard and maintenance duties and external patrols. In a rifle company, each squad conducted one dismounted or mounted six-hour patrol each day or night. That was a heavy grind after three or four months, and it was much harder for the Soldiers who were in-country for 12- to 15-month rotations than for the Marines who generally were there for 7 to 10 months.

Iraq was essentially a police war. In 2007, for instance, 7,400 enemy were reported killed, while six times that number were detained, of whom 19,000 were imprisoned for an average term of 300 days. SOF accounted for about 4,000 of those sent to prison.<sup>20</sup> On average, each deployed conventional battalion arrested and sent an insurgent to prison every other day. Compared to police forces in the U.S., this was a very low rate of arrest, conviction, and imprisonment.

We did not do a good job of modifying military training and force structure to include police methods and measures. Soldiers are not policemen—except when they have to be. About 40 percent of an urban police force is devoted to detective work, with a goal of achieving a high (over 60 percent) arrest and conviction rate for violent crimes. Human exploitation teams or other such units dedicated to investigations and interrogations at the company level composed less than 10 percent of the force. Arrests per battalion varied greatly, driven by the priorities of the commanders.

The war would have been over in a month, had the insurgents worn uniforms. Throughout history, government forces have employed a census to sort out insurgents not wearing uniforms. It is a technique enshrined in all counterinsurgency manuals. I asked a four-star general in early 2005 why there was no census, complete with fingerprints. Why, he said, that could take a year to 18 months, implying the war would be over before then.

On average, a military-aged male in the Sunni Triangle, which includes Baghdad, was stopped once or twice a year for a cursory identification check. But we never used the existing technology to take fingerprints on the spot and send a report back to a central data base for comparison with prints associated with unsolved crimes. This was the

single greatest technical deficiency in the war. Most rifle companies tried to construct their own local census on laptops using digital photos, spreadsheets, and Google mapping. Millions of man-hours were wasted due to a failure at the top to understand how identification of the male population was equivalent to putting uniforms on the insurgents.

Over the course of six years, I embedded with and accompanied over 60 battalions. In terms of conventional war tactics and procedures (METT-T, movement to contact tactics, immediate action drills, etc.), the similarities among units—be they armor or infantry, Army or Marine—were striking. The dissimilarity in counterinsurgency tactics was equally striking. In counterinsurgency, all politics are local, but not all tactics are local. Some tactics are superior to others.

The table below, taken from my 2006 notes, illustrates the variance outside the cities.<sup>21</sup> The operating areas seem vast because once away from the riverbeds, most of the terrain is farmland or flat dirt. It was difficult to ascertain by what criteria areas of operation were assigned to battalions in the rural areas, or what the battalions were expected to accomplish. The KIA number refers to losses in the battalion over the entire tour length. Arrests refer to prisoners sent to prison, not merely detained. Making arrests that stick was not considered a primary task by our battalions.

As 2005 progressed, the tactical styles in the east and west diverged appreciably. U.S. generals in 2005 endorsed falling back to forward operating bases (FOBs) in the east because American troops were seen as an antibody that provoked resistance. The strategy of transitioning to an Iraqi lead meant

pulling back. Consequently, there was less patrolling. In Baghdad, U.S. patrols (including joint patrols) fell from 970 per day in June of 2005 to 642 in February of 2006.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the shift to FOBs in the east, in Anbar to the west, small-unit patrolling from outposts inside and outside the cities continued as the norm, but at a price. With roughly equal forces, Anbar in 2006 accounted for a third more fatalities than Baghdad, where there were fewer patrols.<sup>23</sup>

At the same time, *The New Yorker* magazine, which quixotically assumed the mantle of judging counterinsurgency tactics, lauded Colonel H.R. McMaster for pacifying Tal Afar, while in Al Qaim along the Syrian border a Marine battalion achieved a similar success. In both instances, the key was combining U.S. forces with Iraqi soldiers and police in outposts among the population. Yet it was not until mid-2007 that I noticed a distinct similarity in approach across Iraq, namely containment barriers, outposts in police precincts, neighborhood watches, combined small unit patrolling, and routine partnering with both the Iraqi Army and police forces.

## Humility in Success

The popular view of history is that nations are led from the top by “Great Men,” that leaders like Caesar and Lincoln are the ones who shape history. Most accounts of Iraq likewise subscribe to the Great Man view. Books by senior officials like Bremer, Tenet, Franks, and Sanchez have at their core a wonderful sense of self-worth: history is all about them.

The other view of history holds that the will of the people provides the momentum for change. Leaders

Unit	2 IRAQI BNS	U.S. MOUNTED BN	U.S. INF BN A	U.S. INF BN B
Operating Area	<b>100 sq kms</b>	<b>1,200 sq kms</b>	<b>500 sq kms</b>	<b>800 sq kms</b>
Population	<b>10,000</b>	<b>200,000</b>	<b>40,000</b>	<b>80,000</b>
Outposts	<b>9</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>8</b>
Patrols/Day	<b>4 + 12 ckpts</b>	<b>16 mounted</b>	<b>65 dismount</b>	<b>50 dismount</b>
Battalion KIA	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>14</b>
Arrests/Week	<b>less than 2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>9</b>

are important, but only when they channel popular sentiments or have the common sense to ride the popular movement. “Battle is decided not by the orders of a commander in chief,” Tolstoy writes in *War and Peace*, “but by the spirit of the army.”<sup>24</sup> Iraq reflected Tolstoy’s model. Events were driven by the spirit, or dispirit, of the people and tribes. Iraq was not a Great Man war. Iraq was a kaleidoscope. Turn it one way and you think you see the pattern. Then along comes some unexpected event and the pattern dissolves.

The Awakening changed the context of the war but wasn’t sufficient in itself to turn the war around. That took the troop surge, increasing SOF pressure on insurgent leaders, and the shrewd orchestration of forces by Odierno and Petraeus on the eastern front.

The Awakening wasn’t attributable to economic development; Anbar was starved for funds. It wasn’t due to enlightened governance; Sattar referred to the Baghdad government as “those Persians.” It wasn’t caused by the surge; that came seven months later. It wasn’t attributable to the coalition’s troop-to-task density; Anbar was the economy of force province. The “rule of law” had no bearing; Baghdad wouldn’t even accept the prisoners held in jails in Anbar.

Nor, judging by polls, can one conclude that Americans won Sunni hearts and minds. Indeed, when the Marines arrived in Ramadi in 2004, the residents called them “shotak,” or soft sugar cake. The MEF’s restrained approach elicited scoffing among the tribes. In April of 2004, hundreds of former Iraqi soldiers sneaked into Ramadi to initiate a battle that scarcely ebbed for the next 30 months and wrecked the city.

Sattar came from Ramadi, where American firepower had wrought destruction, providing ample reason for resentment. Yet his theme was that America had not come to occupy, while Al-Qaeda ruled by terror. The tribes rejected that idea in 2004; they bought it in 2006. Shortly before he was assassinated by Al-Qaeda, I asked Sattar why

**Sattar referred to the Baghdad government as “those Persians.”**

the Sunnis hadn’t “awakened” years earlier and spared much bloodshed among both Americans and Sunnis. He thought for a moment, and then said, “We Sunnis had to convince ourselves. You Americans couldn’t do it.”

Some military writers refer to 2004-2006 as “BC,” “before counterinsurgency,” and to 2007-2008 as “AD,” or “after Dave” (Petraeus). But the critical variable in the war—the Sunni swing—originated in Anbar before Petraeus arrived. Our COIN doctrine needs a section devoted to uncertainty and humility. We cannot predict when and why people change allegiances.

In 2003, the U.S.-led coalition overthrew Saddam because he refused to allow UN inspectors to determine that all weapons of mass destruction had been destroyed. In 2004, Bush changed that rationale to emphasize bringing freedom to Iraq. We do not know how the majority Shi’ites will use that freedom to treat the Sunnis and Kurds. While economic development, responsive governance, the rule of (Western) law, and nation building (in our image) are laudable goals, they remain unaccomplished in Iraq. But we must keep in mind that these unfinished tasks were not essential *military* tasks.

What caused the Americans to prevail? Both the Army and Marines went into Iraq with a mindset of a kinetic, decisive battle, but they turned that idea around in less than three years. The key COIN ingredients were forbearance in dealing with the people, partnering from the bottom up, and perseverance—patrolling in 110-degree heat in the dust and mud, amidst snipers and IEDs. The Sunnis grudgingly concluded that Americans were not soft sugar cake and that the Shi’ite-dominated government could not be overthrown. It was better to join with the strongest tribe and cut a deal with

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Baghdad than remain under the control of the murderous Al-Qaeda with its vision of returning to a 9th-century caliphate.

All wars end, and this one will, too. We just do not know when. Recruits for our Special Forces are subjected to arduous tasks that seem to have no finish or boundaries. That uncertainty in the face of exhaustion tests the moral fiber of the recruit. In Iraq, our Soldiers and Marines passed that test. We cannot predict when the morale of the insurgent will break. So we must persevere, determined that the enemy will break before we do.

In our military writings, we have overemphasized theories about nation building and understated the practical effect of aggressive tactics on the ground. Our Soldiers and Marines are riflemen; they signed on to be grunts. We have to reward that aggressive spirit. Colonel John Ripley, a wonderful war-fighter, once remarked that grunts like to fight; they just know it's not politically correct to say so. Of all the variables, the perseverance and grit of our Soldiers and Marines were the most critical to success in Iraq.

### **Lessons for the Next Fight**

Afghanistan is the next test. The sanctuary in western Pakistan has enabled Al-Qaeda and the Taliban to regroup, while many of our NATO allies have been unwilling to engage. So the fighting has escalated.

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Of the four tasks essential to stabilizing Afghanistan, three are military:

- We must train a government force, to include a defense system at the village level that prevents the Taliban from establishing a sanctuary for Al-Qaeda inside Afghanistan. This training means U.S. troops must be fully partnered with Afghan troops and police. The fundamental defect is the lack of training for police detective work, census-taking, and imprisonment of wrongdoers.

Operating at the village level will test whether we have become too risk-averse as a military and as a nation—whether we are willing to patrol in the mountains without body armor, whether small units are permitted to conduct multi-day patrols, whether small outposts can be protected without incurring unsustainable costs, and whether our political system can sustain the publicity attendant to casualties, year after year. We know that Afghanistan will achieve a satisfactory level of stability only when the Pashtun sub-tribes reject and stand up to the Taliban. We don't know when that will happen. We know the tribes like to fight. In the film *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, Paul Newman looks at the posse in pursuit and says, "Who are those guys?" The two famous bandits decide to flee rather than fight. Placing similarly unremitting pressure on the Taliban inside Afghanistan requires determination and endurance more than improved theories. The task is daunting, given that Pakistan's western frontier is a sanctuary.

- We must support that Afghan force (thus retaining leverage over the Kabul government) for at least a decade or more at a cost of several billion dollars a year.

- We must continuously strike at our real enemy—Al-Qaeda in western Pakistan. Although there's some hope that the western tribes and the army in Pakistan will prove stouter than in the past, Al-Qaeda remains a ticking bomb. A second dreadful attack upon American citizens would dramatically escalate the current clandestine, measured effort against Al-Qaeda. It's reasonable to assume the Joint Chiefs have a contingency plan to pursue Al-Qaeda inside Pakistan's frontier relentlessly, should a second attack occur.

These military tasks can draw on skills learned in Iraq. They are inadequate without the fourth task of linking security at the village level, through the

provinces, to the corrupt and rickety central government in Kabul. The goal is not to intentionally create tribal warlords, although the unintentional emergence of a charismatic leader like Sattar cannot be predicted. If it does happen, commanders like McFarland will recognize the potential. But the U.S. military must have a mechanism for then handing off further political development to foreign service officers. This did not happen in Anbar with the Awakening because our diplomats did not have the contacts or leverage. Indeed, U.S. troops in Iraq still provide a buffer for the Sunnis and insurance against rash acts by a serpentine prime minister and fractious legislators. We should not assign a similar mission to our military in Afghanistan. That is the political domain of the State Department.

The recent DOD Directive for Irregular Warfare states that “stability operations are a core U.S. military mission.”<sup>25</sup> Although it is inchoate in defining tasks, the directive does demand military “implementation of whole-of-government strategies.”<sup>26</sup> Whoa! This is going entirely too far.

President Obama appointed Ambassador Richard Holbrooke as Special Envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, with the mandate to coordinate across the entire government an effort to achieve U.S. strategic goals in the region. It is his mission, not that of the U.S. military, to implement the “whole-of-government” strategy.

We should not Americanize this war. If we do, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda will say they are fighting the invaders for the sake of the Afghans. The essential problem is that the Taliban believe and preach their absolutist cause, while Hamid Karzai and his coterie have provided no competing narrative pointing to a responsible government. The U.S. military should not be the primary implement of our foreign policy.

The counterinsurgent principles enshrined in the FMs—economic development, good governance, the rule of law, and democratic nation building—are a mixture of theory and tautology that appeal to Western liberal philosophic thought. None account for the Sunni change in attitude that altered the context of the war in Iraq. In Afghanistan, those lines of operations should be placed under the State Department, recognizing that it could take 40 years and \$100 billion to pull Afghanistan into the 21st century, and that might happen long after American troops have gone. **MR**

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## NOTES

- 1,064 fatalities in Anbar in 2004-2006, of a total of 2,517, or 42 percent, <icasualties.org>.
- 683 fatalities in Baghdad region 2004-2006, of a total of 2,517, or 27 percent, <icasualties.org>.
- 403 fatalities in Baghdad region in 2007, of a total of 904, or 44 percent, <icasualties.org>.
- E.B. Sledge, *With the Old Breed* (New York: Random House, 1981), 3.
- Michael Gerson, “The Man Who Stayed,” *Washington Post*, 17 October 2008, 22.
- Jonathan Schroden, *Measures for Security in a Counterinsurgency*, Center for Naval Analyses, 10.
- In 2006, there were 356 fatalities in Anbar, and 822 overall, or 43 percent. In 2007, there were 163, and 904 overall, or 17 percent, <icasualties.org>.
- Schroden, 12.
- Ibid.*, 18.
- Baghdad accounted for 403 of the 904 U.S. fatalities in 2007, or 44 percent, <icasualties.org>.
- Bob Woodward, *The War Within: A Secret White House History 2006-2008* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008).
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- Senate Armed Services Committee, Abizaid remarks, 3 August 2006, 49.
- Data collected over multiple trips from MNF-I and MNF-C.
- Field notes collected throughout Iraq in 2006.
- MNF-C data. On 5 June 2005, there were in Baghdad 360 U.S. patrols, 250 Iraqi and 610 Joint; on 1 February 2006, there were 92 U.S., 460 Iraqi, and 550 Joint patrols.
- Robert Burns, “U.S. General Lays Out Plan,” AP, 13 August 2006. There were 10 U.S. maneuver battalions in Anbar, and 12,500 U.S. Soldiers in Baghdad.
- Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace* ([1865] New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 1051.
- DOD Directive 3000.07, 1 December 2008, 2.
- Ibid.*, 5.