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The Iraq War: A Commander's Perspective

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Introduction

It is a pleasure to be back in Newport and an honor to speak to you this afternoon. I have a lot of great memories from my days as a student here at the Naval War College; it was undoubtedly one of the most enjoyable experiences of my career, both from a personal and a professional standpoint.

When I visit places like this, I am often reminded that as military officers, we don't get enough opportunities during our careers to pause and think critically about our profession. To that end, I think it is important for military officers to spend time in academic environments such as this where they can read, write, listen to speakers, attend conferences like this one and interact with people who have different experiences, different points of view.

To you military officers in the audience today who are students here at the Naval War College, I say enjoy your time here, but make good use of it. Take some of those ideas that have been bouncing around in your head and share them with the rest of us. We have an old saying in the Army that a soldier should always improve his foxhole. I believe, as leaders, we have a similar obligation to our profession. That means having the courage to speak up and share ideas about how you think we can do things better. Granted, that is not always easy. People with innovative ideas often receive their fair share of pushback. But the flip side is you never know when one of your ideas will be the catalyst for real, meaningful change. As

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President John Quincy Adams said, “If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, you are a leader.”

Now that I have talked about the benefits of being in an academic setting, I have to poke a little fun at the folks who do this for a living. After spending the last thirteen months with my soldiers in Iraq—guys who use short sentences filled with colorful expletives, and for whom the word “*hooah*” is a noun, a verb and an all-purpose adjective—I had to chuckle when I saw the topic that the good people at the Naval War College asked me to address today in ninety minutes or less: “Provide a commander’s perspective on the Iraq war. Discuss the principal military objectives and problems encountered in the offensive campaign, counterinsurgency operations, and the occupation and stability phases of the Iraq war.”

Since I knew the audience would primarily be attorneys and academics, I asked my staff judge advocate, Mike Ryan, to explain the topic to me. Unfortunately, he spent thirteen months with me in Iraq, and I think it affected his ability to deal with complex subjects because when I asked for his help, he read the topic, shook his head and said: “Sir, I don’t know what it means, but it sounds pretty *hooah*.”

In all seriousness, let me start by saying that contrary to what you might think, I have no special insight about the war in Iraq. One thing I’ve learned over the years is that in Iraq, as in every war, a person’s knowledge of things really depends on three things: when they were there, where they operated and their job. A soldier who fought in the Ia Drang Valley of Vietnam in 1965, for example, would have a much different perspective on the Vietnam War than, say, a Marine who fought in Northern I-Corps or a Navy pilot who flew bombing missions from an aircraft carrier. In much the same way, my experiences as an Assistant Division Commander for Operations in northern Iraq in 2006 and 2007 differed considerably from my experiences as a Division Commander in central and southern Iraq in 2008 and 2009. And, of course, neither of those two experiences resembled the time I spent as Chief of Staff to the Chief Operations Officer, Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad.

So what I have to say about Iraq today should probably be qualified to some extent since, like any other soldier, my remarks and opinions are based primarily on my own experiences during selected snapshots in time. Unlike a lot of folks who come to Iraq, receive a briefing in the Green Zone, then leave the country the next day, I will not claim to be an expert on Iraq.

The Initial Offensive Phase

As we all know, the war in Iraq began in March 2003 and it is still going on as we sit here today. Given the length of the war, and the infinite number of issues we could discuss, it should come as no surprise that in the next ninety minutes we will have

to concentrate on a few key issues and try to hit just the wave tops. Also, I hope this will be more of a dialogue than a speech, so I will make a few key points on each issue and leave plenty of time for your questions and comments.

In keeping with the topics I was given, I will start by saying a few words about the initial offensive phase of the war. I think this is a subject worthy of discussion because it provides us with a number of important lessons learned.

I think the major lesson we learned during the initial phase of the war can be summed up by the age-old military maxim “you fight like you train.” On that point, I would submit to you that prior to the invasion of Iraq no military in the world trained itself and its leaders for combat better than the US military. How we got to that level of proficiency is a remarkable story in and of itself and, as we will discuss later, it is a story that, in my opinion, is still instructive today.

In the post-Vietnam era, the men who commanded platoons and companies in Vietnam took a hard look at how the Vietnam War was conducted and what it did to the military. As they began to occupy positions of power they drew on those bitter experiences and said, “Never again.” Those men—the ones author James Kitfield called the “prodigal soldiers”¹—rolled up their sleeves and rebuilt the US military, taking an institution crippled by drug use, disciplinary problems, racial tensions, poor training and inadequate resources, and making it the best trained, best equipped, most professional fighting force the world has ever seen.

I have some personal experience with that time, having graduated from the US Military Academy in 1979. These days, when I hear younger officers complain about the Army, I am quick to remind them that I joined an Army that had just lost a war. Using words that are much too colorful for this forum, I go on to tell them that they simply cannot conceive how messed up that Army was then.

But in 2003, that was certainly not the case. As I noted a moment ago, what our military did best in the years leading up to the invasion of Iraq was train for combat. Our ground forces—the Army in particular—did this at our combat training centers: the National Training Center for our heavy forces and the Joint Readiness Training Center for our light fighters.

Because we were so well trained, so well equipped, so well led and so well resourced, we were able to invade Iraq in March 2003, defeat its military and topple its government in relatively short order using a force with less combat power than the one that liberated Kuwait during Operation Desert Storm. Putting aside the political reasons we invaded Iraq in 2003 and looking at things from a purely military standpoint, I think no fair-minded person can deny that our military was tremendously successful during the opening phase of the war. I believe that success was because we fought like we trained. What we did not know then—and if we are honest with ourselves, what we must admit now—is that as good as our combat

training was, we were not well trained, well resourced or well prepared for the post-combat phase. To paraphrase the now famous quote from Secretary of State Colin Powell: we did a great job breaking Iraq, but we were not prepared for what happened once we bought it.

I say that understanding full well that hindsight is 20/20 and it is easy for me to stand here and critique operations after the fact. That is certainly not my intent. But part of making our military better is, as I mentioned at the outset, having the courage to look hard at ourselves in order to identify where we could have done things better and where we should change things in the future.

I sometimes tell my subordinates, “You’re entitled to your own opinions, but you’re not entitled to your own facts.” In that vein, if we are fair and realistic, we have to say the facts with regard to the post-conflict phase speak for themselves, and what they tell is that the US military was neither trained nor resourced to be an occupying force in a country as large and complex as Iraq.

Even today, after all of the tremendous work the military has done in Iraq along the governance, economics, civil capacity and rule of law lines of effort, there are still those who argue that using the military for missions other than combat operations is like trying to hammer nails with a screwdriver. I have my own ideas on that point, some of which I will share with you later in this presentation.

Counterinsurgency Operations

Turning to counterinsurgency (COIN) operations, it is important to look at the situation that gave rise to the insurgency in the first place. As I noted previously, our initial invasion of Iraq was quick and successful militarily. However when the dust settled we looked around and realized that we were in charge of a country twice the size of Idaho; a country with six international borders and a population of over twenty-two million people from different religious, ethnic, cultural and tribal backgrounds. People who, as we soon found out, in many cases didn’t like each other very much.

As if this situation were not challenging enough, the country we were in charge of had a long history of violence and oppression committed by a corrupt, dictatorial central government—a government that had systematically abused, neglected, stolen from and murdered its own citizens. It was a place where, in the best of cases, disputes were settled with decisions made by sheiks and tribal elders; in the worst of cases, they were settled with kidnapping, violence and murder. To make the problem even more interesting, the country we now controlled had no functioning police force or court system, and very little in the way of essential services like water, sewer, sanitation, medical care and electricity.

As someone with a background in physics, I can tell you that nature really does abhor a vacuum, and post-invasion Iraq was no exception. Accordingly, in little to no time, the power vacuums that existed in Iraq after the fall of the former regime were filled by a number of very dedicated and very aggressive groups, all vying for power and control.

Like most things in Iraq, the insurgency was split along religious, cultural and ethnic lines. Insurgents ranged from the Shiite groups like *Jaish al-Mahdi* (JAM) to the Sunni-led Al Qaeda in Iraq, and everything in between. In addition to their desire for power and control, most of these groups shared an intense hatred of the coalition forces, which they saw as occupiers. In the case of some of these groups, most notably Al Qaeda in Iraq, they were willing to commit horrific acts of violence and terrorism not only against military forces, but against anyone not aligned with their agenda, including Iraqi civilians.

So there we were, a relatively small military force being asked to confront a litany of problems—ones that would eventually take years to solve. We had to deal with everything from defeating a violent insurgency to meeting the basic human needs of the Iraqi civilian population and myriad problems falling between those two extremes. The challenges inherent in defeating the insurgency are something that could be talked about and debated for hours. In keeping with my “wave tops” approach to this talk, I will simply say that it took us a while to figure out the right approach.

How to defeat the insurgency in Iraq was something of a “chicken and egg” dilemma: do we concentrate on solving the problems of the Iraqi people—most notably things like essential services—first, or do we focus on killing and capturing the bad guys and, once things are secure, concentrate on making the Iraqis’ daily lives better? Some, including many of our senior military leaders in Iraq during the first part of the war, advocated the former.

This “essential services first” school of thought argued that if the Iraqi people had electricity, clean water, trash pickup and schools for their children, they would be less likely to turn to a violent insurgency to solve their problems. It was a reasonable approach, one that makes sense on its face. We traveled along that line of drift for the first few years of the war, but what we eventually found was our successes were not really widespread or sustainable.

Again, I am not saying there is no merit at all to this approach. I will be the first one to tell you that you cannot kill your way out of a situation such as we had in Iraq. Attriting the enemy is undoubtedly important, but what we learned over time in Iraq was that success in a counterinsurgency campaign depends on more than just killing the enemy. There is a time and a place to do that for sure, but in counterinsurgency you have to take things a step further. To put it simply, you have to

kill the right guys at the right places at the right times. Lethal operations have to disrupt networks and take out financiers. It's graduate-level stuff that goes well beyond the basic infantryman's ability to enter and clear a room.

I think another problem we had with defeating the insurgency relates in a way to the point I made in my initial remarks about fighting like we trained. What do I mean by that? Let me explain. The US military has always been at its best when it goes toe-to-toe with a definable, quantifiable enemy. In fact, many of our senior leaders during the first part of the Iraq war were guys who trained virtually all of their professional lives to defeat Soviet and Warsaw Pact armored formations coming through the Fulda Gap. In that kind of fighting, metrics and data are critically important: How many tanks am I up against? How many gallons of fuel do I have? How many BMPs,² tanks and artillery pieces do I have to kill before the enemy is combat ineffective? In my opinion, early in the war we often fell back on that mode of thinking, relying on numbers and metrics as a measure of our effectiveness.

Indeed, if you look back on the first few years of the war, our reports and briefings from that time were filled with statistics: number of patrols conducted, number of caches found and cleared, number of improvised explosive device (IED) or indirect fire attacks. With respect to the "essential services first" approach discussed a few moments ago, this love of numbers fit right into the template for success. We tracked the number of schools built, number of hours of electricity provided, number of Commander's Emergency Response Program projects initiated and number of dollars spent on those projects. With so many impressive statistics, pie charts and metrics on so many colorful PowerPoint slides, how could we be losing?

The problem was we *were* losing. To some extent, I attribute that to something that absolutely drives me around the bend: we were constantly looking at data without doing any analysis of what that data really means. To make matters worse, the data were often interpreted by people farthest from the source of the data—good people who through no fault of their own had no context whatsoever. When I think of those days, I am reminded of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, who said of Vietnam: "Every quantitative measurement we have shows we're winning this war."³

In my judgment, too often we relied on the raw numbers instead of thinking about what those numbers really meant. What I think we learned over time is that counterinsurgency is about people, not about data. It's not easy, as I indicated earlier when I addressed killing the enemy during COIN operations; it's graduate-level stuff. You have to do the hard work and take things a step further. You have to analyze people, relationships, networks and all kinds of complicated dynamics that take place between people on the ground and, in the case of Iraq, you have to understand the culture.

I think as a military force we became much more successful against the insurgency in Iraq when, under the leadership of General Petraeus and others who had taken a hard look at counterinsurgency, we realized that this fight was about people. People and relationships really are the center of gravity in a COIN fight. To get to know people, we had to get out of our forward operating bases, out of our vehicles and out of our comfort zones, and start talking to the Iraqis, developing relationships and partnering with the police and the army units we were over there trying to help.

Once we started talking to people, one of the first things we learned was that our “essential services first” approach was probably not the way to go. Under General Petraeus and General Odierno, we transitioned to the alternate view and began to secure the population. I think in many ways this helped us to tip the balance in our favor. Of course our success was enabled by a number of other factors, including the Anbar Awakening⁴ and the Sons of Iraq,⁵ the JAM ceasefire and, of course, the US troop surge. But none of those things, in my opinion, would have in and of itself brought us success without the change in direction and strategy, changes that forced us to stop looking at numbers and start talking to people.

Stability Operations

I would like to close my formal remarks by addressing our experience with stability operations in Iraq. In terms of recent experience, this is a subject I am very familiar with since the Army division I commanded in Iraq for the last year had governance, economics, civil capacity building and rule of law as its major lines of effort, especially during the second half of our tour.

When our division arrived in Iraq in May 2008, a number of us on the division staff had served in Iraq before. One of the first things that struck us all was the improvement in the security situation, especially in our area of operations, which encompassed most of central and southern Iraq. It was something that took us all a while to get used to.

In fact, during our first month in country, we were directed by our corps headquarters to assist the Iraqi army with retaking the city of Amarah, a large city in southeastern Iraq that had traditionally been a hotbed of *Jaish al-Mahdi* activity. Our staff worked hard on the plan. We spent considerable time looking in great detail at things like supporting fires, close air support, medical evacuation and detainee handling and processing. I even took my staff judge advocate with me to a joint planning meeting with the Iraqis at a place called Camp Sparrow Hawk near the city of Amarah because we were sure we would have to discuss rules of engagement, targeting and detainee issues with the Iraqi Army leadership.

To make a long story short, a few days later, Iraqi security forces (ISF) entered Amarah and retook the city without firing a single shot. For many of us who had been to Iraq before, the Amarah operation was something of a wake-up call. It demonstrated to us that things in Iraq really had changed. Now this is not to say Iraq is a safe place to be. It is still dangerous. During Task Force Mountain's tenure in Iraq we had fourteen soldiers killed and another sixty wounded. My point is that by the time we arrived, Iraqi security forces were well on their way to becoming a very proficient, capable force, and that, in my opinion, was one of the reasons we were able to focus our efforts on more non-kinetic missions.

In terms of stability operations, let me say just a few words about our work with Iraqi security forces. During our tour we partnered extensively with the Iraqi army, the Iraqi police, and the Iraqi Department of Border Enforcement. In fact, because I believed so strongly that a capable ISF is one of the major keys to stability in Iraq, I made ISF professionalization my division's main effort during the first half of the deployment.

Similar to what I addressed during the discussion on counterinsurgency, one of the things we found was that the better we got to know our ISF counterparts on a human level, the better we were able to teach, coach and mentor them, and the better they became. Our approach was simple—we made the ISF part of our formations. By that, I mean we did things like “shadow tracking” their supply, maintenance and personnel statistics so we could help them where they needed help the most. Not to put too fine a point on it, but I told my commanders and many of my staff from the start that I would judge their success by the success of their ISF partners.

I think the development of the ISF was the key to stability and I am proud to say our ISF partners developed into a tremendously capable force. By the middle part of our tour, for example, we stopped conducting unilateral operations in our division and began performing everything by, with and through the ISF. What we found was that as the ISF worked with us and became more professional, so did we. For their part, the ISF know the people, speak the language and can pick up on a lot of things we can't as Americans. For our part, we bring a wealth of knowledge on how to man, train and equip an army, along with a number of technologically advanced intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance platforms and other enablers to which the ISF don't have access. By letting the ISF take the lead, we found the Iraqi people began to see them as a force that could be trusted—and trust is a critical component of Iraqi culture. As a measure of that trust, I will tell you that by the end of our tour over 90 percent of the tips we received about things like weapons caches and IEDs came from local nationals, usually through the ISF. I see that as a sign of real progress in the stability realm.

As I mentioned a moment ago, governance, economics, civil capacity building and rule of law were major lines of effort for us during Task Force Mountain's tour in Iraq—so much so that during our train up, we reorganized our fires and effects cell and devoted it almost entirely to governance, economics and reconstruction. I added a full-time political adviser from the Department of State to my staff and directed my Deputy Commanding General for Support to take the lead for all matters having to do with governance and civil capacity building. Given the time, resources and energy we put into those missions, I could talk about any one of them for hours, but since many of you in the audience are legal professionals, I will touch on some of our initiatives in the rule of law line of effort that I believe you will find interesting.

I think two things combined to jump-start our rule of law efforts during the last year. The first was the improved security situation that allowed us to focus on tasks and missions outside the security line of operation. The second was the implementation of the US-Iraq security agreement.⁶

For those of you unfamiliar with the security agreement, in January 2009 it replaced United Nations Security Council Resolution 1790⁷ as the legal authority for US operations in Iraq. To my knowledge, the US-Iraq security agreement is the only status-of-forces-type agreement to which the United States is a party that authorizes US forces to conduct combat operations in the host nation. The caveat to that authorization is that our operations must be approved by and coordinated with the government of Iraq, and they must be conducted with full respect for Iraqi law and the Iraqi Constitution.

The requirement for us to conduct operations in accordance with Iraqi law has had a profound effect on the way we do things. In fact, many of you might be surprised to learn that the vast majority of US military operations in Iraq these days are conducted pursuant to arrest and search warrants issued by Iraqi judges.

By way of background, the Iraqi legal system is very similar to the US legal system with respect to criminal procedure. Before an arrest warrant can be issued, evidence must be presented to an Iraqi investigative judge. If the judge issues a warrant and the individual is apprehended, Iraqi law mandates that the person be brought before a judge within twenty-four hours for a detention hearing.

Because the security agreement requires US forces to abide by Iraqi law, we are bound by the rules I just described. In much the same way as I described how our efforts to professionalize the ISF were successful when we made them part of our formations, the security agreement's requirement that we work through the Iraqi legal system helped us make great strides in the rule of law. As we started moving actions through the Iraqi courts and dealing with Iraqi judges, we found that there

was a certain amount of dysfunction in the Iraqi legal system, especially at the provincial level.

The police were often poorly trained, the judges were overworked and under-resourced, and the detention facilities had their share of issues. Based on the fact that we had to obtain warrants, our units had to develop better relationships with the police, the prosecutors and the judges in their local areas. In doing so, we were able to better identify gaps, seams and shortcomings in their training and in their systems that we were able to address.

One thing we found initially was that the Iraqi police and judges were not familiar with forensic evidence. Their legal system has always been testimony based. To help solve this problem we developed a number of innovative programs to train Iraqi judges and Iraqi prosecutors on forensic evidence. In a companion effort, US police training teams worked to train Iraqi police on basic crime scene investigation techniques and the fundamentals of actually securing forensic evidence. Finally, US explosive ordnance disposal experts have made great strides in teaching the Iraqi army how to collect basic forensic evidence at the sites of IED blasts and at the points of origin and points of impact of rocket and mortar attacks.

Since the implementation of the security agreement, US commanders have become well versed in obtaining arrest warrants and detention orders from investigative judges. To accomplish this task, most US divisions and brigades have formed law enforcement task forces made up of individuals with the relevant expertise. The organization of each task force varies slightly; however, most include judge advocates, military police officers, intelligence analysts, and one or more US contractors known as law enforcement professionals (LEPs). The LEPs are a relatively new addition to the fight in Iraq. Most are retired police officers from cities around the United States who are under contract to assist US forces with law enforcement-related tasks and training. The expertise and experience the LEPs have provided have been invaluable during the transition to warrant-based operations.

As you all know, one of the major keys to stability in any country is having a legal system the citizens can trust and depend on. Without a system for the peaceful resolution of disputes, order breaks down and people take the law into their own hands. I think our efforts in the rule of law arena have been a major driver of stability, especially in central and southern Iraq.

Conclusion

I will conclude by saying there is still a lot of hard work ahead of us in Iraq. By all indications, Iraq will turn out to be the longest war our nation has ever experienced and the effects of the war, especially on our military, remain to be seen.

For the military officers in the room today, I say be proud of what your profession has accomplished in Iraq. As I noted at the start, never stop thinking how to make things better. For our friends from other branches of public service and from the services of allied nations, I commend you. Very few citizens of any nation answer their country's call these days. Those of you who have should be immensely proud. For those of you from academia and non-governmental organizations, I hope you will keep thinking, keep writing and keep challenging us to do our jobs better. Without debate and constructive criticism, we in the military can get too comfortable with our own points of view.

It has been my pleasure to get the chance to spend time with you today. Thank you very much.

Notes

1. JAMES KITFIELD, *PRODIGAL SOLDIERS: HOW THE GENERATION OF OFFICERS BORN OF VIETNAM REVOLUTIONIZED THE AMERICAN STYLE OF WAR* (1995).

2. Russian tracked infantry combat vehicles.

3. NEIL SHEEHAN, *A BRIGHT SHINING LIE* 290 (1988).

4. For a discussion of the Anbar Awakening, see, e.g., Melinda Liu, *Gathering the Tribes: U.S. field commanders are finally beginning to tap the traditional networks that helped Saddam to stay in power*, *NEWSWEEK*, June 4, 2007, at 32; Martin Fletcher, *How life returned to the streets in a showpiece city that drove out al-Qaeda*, *TIMES* (London), Aug. 31, 2007, at 42.

5. For a discussion of the role of the Sons of Iraq in contributing to local security, see General David H. Petraeus, Commander, Multi-National Force–Iraq, Statement Before the Senate Armed Services Committee (Apr. 8, 2008), available at <http://armed-services.senate.gov/statemnt/2008/April/Petraeus%2004-08-08.pdf>.

6. Agreement Between the United States of America and the Republic of Iraq on the Withdrawal of United States Forces from Iraq and the Organization of Their Activities during Their Temporary Presence in Iraq, U.S.-Iraq, Nov. 17, 2008, available at http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/world/20081119_SOFA_FINAL_AGREED_TEXT.pdf.

7. S.C. Res. 1790, U.N. Doc. S/RES/1790 (Dec. 18, 2007).