

2019

Review Essay: From Victory to Failure, The Army Study of the Iraq War, 2003–2006

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Recommended Citation

Zakheim, Dov S.; Rayburn, Joel D.; and Sobchak, Frank K. (2019) "Review Essay: From Victory to Failure, The Army Study of the Iraq War, 2003–2006," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 72 : No. 4 , Article 17.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol72/iss4/17>

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FROM VICTORY TO FAILURE THE ARMY STUDY OF THE IRAQ WAR, 2003–2006

Dov S. Zakheim

The U.S. Army in the Iraq War, ed. Joel D. Rayburn [Col., USA] and Frank K. Sobchak [Col., USA]. Vol. 1, *Invasion, Insurgency, Civil War: 2003–2006*. Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2019. 742 pages. Free (e-book).

Sixteen years after the United States launched Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF), the war remains highly controversial, and American troops continue to operate in Iraq, albeit at reduced force levels and with far more-limited operational and tactical objectives. Recognizing that it was time to take stock of the Army's performance in a decade of operations, former Army Chief of Staff General Raymond T. Odierno initiated what the Army calls an "in-stride study" of the service's performance, and the lessons it should derive therefrom. The result was a massive two-volume Army War College study edited by two Army colonels, Joel D. Rayburn and Frank K. Sobchak, and supported by a large staff that conducted hundreds of hours of interviews and reviewed thousands of pages of studies, memos, transcripts, and other materials, many of which were declassified specifically for the purposes of the study. The first of these two volumes addresses the run-up to the war and ends as the strategy of force reduction and handover to Iraqi units proved to be a complete failure. The study is dry and at times repetitive, but it offers an unvarnished assessment of both the Army's performance and the leadership decisions that drove strategy and operations before, during, and after the conduct of major hostilities.

Following what has become standard Pentagon procedure, both Odierno's foreword to the study and a second foreword by General Mark A. Milley, the current Army Chief of Staff and the designated successor to General Joseph F. Dunford, USMC, current chairman of the Joint Chiefs, offer the reader their respective "bottom lines up front." Odierno, who had served as a division, corps, and force commander in Iraq, and therefore was able to observe the war from tactical,

operational, and strategic perspectives, draws several major conclusions relating to all three levels of warfare. He bluntly observes that "those who rejected the idea that there is an operational level of war in counterinsurgency were wrong" (p. xxix). Indeed, as the report demonstrates, the

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Naval War College Review, Autumn 2019, Vol. 72, No. 4

Army continually committed a series of operational errors, primarily through deployment decisions that left major sectors, notably Baghdad itself, vulnerable to insurgent and sectarian attacks. These decisions stemmed from a chronic shortage of Army personnel. That shortage, as the study points out at some length, resulted both from Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld's desire to reduce force levels in Iraq as quickly as possible and from Army Chief of Staff General Peter J. Schoomaker's determination to "transform" Army force structure in the midst of the conflict.

Odierno also notes that the Army failed to understand the nature of the operating environment "and the local political and social consequences of our actions, especially when facing an enemy who understands the environment better than we do" (p. xxix). He adds that "when conditions on the ground change, we must be willing to reexamine the assumptions that underpin our strategy and plans and change course if necessary, no matter how painful it may be" (p. xxix). To do so, however, Odierno, as well as General George W. Casey, USA, who headed the multinational force in Iraq, and other senior Army commanders, would have had to challenge the notion that prevailed in the Pentagon well into 2005: that the opposition to the allied coalition's operations stemmed from "former regime elements" loyal to Saddam Hussein. In fact, by 2004 the coalition was facing two parallel insurgencies: one Sunni and the other Shia. The Sunnis resented what they perceived as allied favoritism toward the Shias. For their part, an element of the Shias, the Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) militia, led by the firebrand cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, pressed for the expulsion of American forces and sought to be the dominant Shia political and military entity.

Nevertheless, the study offers little evidence that the Army—or, for that matter, the Marines or the Joint Chiefs of Staff—actively sought to redefine the coalition's real enemy. Their reticence may not have amounted to a "dereliction of duty," as H. R. McMaster, himself a senior general serving in Iraq, would have defined the term, in no small part because the senior Army leadership at least initially shared the Pentagon's view. Nevertheless, as Odierno implicitly admits, once the generals on the ground recognized that they were confronting an insurgency, they should not have waited as long as they did to push for a change in Pentagon strategy.

Yet another of Odierno's takeaways is that "[w]e must also employ better ways of generating and partnering with effective and legitimate host nation forces and of accounting for the political pressures that constrain those forces" (p. xxix). He implies ever so politely that the Army leadership focused too heavily on quantitative measures, such as number of units trained, to reach optimistic conclusions regarding the speed with which coalition forces could hand over tactical leadership to the Iraqi military. As the report notes, quantitative measures obscured the political-military realities that were the true determinants of Iraqi military

capability, which could be evaluated only subjectively. These realities included the corruption endemic at all levels of the military, as well as the ethnic hatreds that fueled what became a civil war and that the Iraqi Shia political leadership, including Ibrahim al-Ja'fari and his successor as prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, fostered both actively and passively.

General Milley's foreword outlines some additional lessons learned from Operation IRAQI FREEDOM and the Army War College study. Milley rightly notes that "the promise of short wars is often elusive" (p. xxvii). He might have dropped the word "often"; to paraphrase Clausewitz, it is difficult to predict any conflict's outcome during "the fog of war."

Echoing Odierno, Milley also asserts that "our Army must understand the type of war we are engaged with in order to adapt as necessary" (p. xxvii). What neither he nor Odierno states explicitly is that accurate intelligence—at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels—is critical to understanding the changing nature of a conflict. As the report demonstrates, time and again such intelligence, and the analysis of its findings, simply was not available to senior commanders. In particular, General Casey and his superior, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) commander General John P. Abizaid, USA, appear not to have been made aware before the February 2006 bombing of the al-Askari mosque, a Shia shrine in Samarra, that the conflict was evolving from an insurgency into a civil war. The availability of that intelligence might have led them both to argue against the ongoing drawdown of American forces and to maintain a major force presence in Baghdad, which quickly became the epicenter of the civil war.

Echoing the land forces' side of the long-standing debate with air forces, Milley writes that "OIF is a sober reminder that technological advantages and standoff weapons alone cannot render a decision" (p. xxvii). Milley clearly is referring to the notion that technologically induced "shock and awe" would produce a quick victory on the battlefield. Yet to a certain extent that is exactly what happened; America's technological superiority was a key factor in its decisive victory.

On the other hand, as the report makes clear, it was the failure of the military in general and of CENTCOM commander General Tommy R. Franks, USA, in particular to plan for the aftermath of conflict that led to its extending well beyond the defeat of Hussein's Iraqi forces. The lack of a viable "phase four" plan was compounded by the appointment of Ambassador L. Paul "Jerry" Bremer—a man with no experience in the Middle East—to lead the Coalition Provisional Authority and of freshly minted Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, USA, to lead the coalition forces.

Indeed, Bremer's decision to disband the Iraqi army and purge Iraq's administrative bureaucracy of all Baathists, when to keep their jobs virtually all bureaucrats had to belong to the party, led to a breakdown of governance that fostered

civil unrest. Moreover, because he reported to both President George W. Bush and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, Bremer came to see himself as an American proconsul—the ultimate source of authority in Iraq. He not only clashed with Sanchez, whom he considered his subordinate, but also resisted suggestions from anyone other than the president. I discovered this personally when—with the support of the State Department, the Office of Management and Budget, and the National Security Council staff—he rejected my proposal to add funds to the highly successful Commanders' Emergency Response Program.

The Army War College study offers numerous other lessons that can be learned from the many missteps that took place from the war's inception through its first phase, which ended in 2006 and is the subject of the report's first volume. Beginning with the run-up to the war, the report notes that

within the DoD [Department of Defense] itself, structural stovepipes inhibited information sharing . . . and, when combined with Rumsfeld's managerial style and the personality conflicts among key leaders, resulted in a tightly compartmentalized planning process that focused too heavily on major combat operations and was not coordinated across DoD or the broader U.S. Government. The quick tactical victory over the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan . . . convinced [Rumsfeld] and others that a small U.S. force aided by indigenous fighters and air power could replicate the feat in Iraq. (p. 49)

Having served in the Pentagon during the period covered in this report, I can confirm both that planning indeed was restricted tightly to a very small group of officials—not necessarily including me—and that there was a tremendous degree of friction between the Pentagon and the State Department—virtually an intra-governmental civil war. Both factors contributed to the absence of a viable Phase IV stability operations plan, which in turn fueled the insurrection and civil war that coalition forces confronted from 2004 to 2006.

The Army War College study also outlines the degree to which Iran intervened in Iraq virtually from the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Saddam regime. Tehran supported the activities of the Badr Corps, the military arm of the Shia Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, which initially targeted Sunni Baath loyalists, and even Shias whom it identified as “collaborationists.” To a lesser extent Tehran also supported Sadr's JAM militia. With the passage of time, the Badr Corps's death squads and the JAM—though mutually hostile, at times to the point of open warfare—attacked Sunnis of all stripes, in part as a response to Tawhid al-Jihad leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's decision to prioritize attacks on Shias so as to foment a civil war.

Indeed, Iran was not unhappy with the expansion of civil strife in Iraq. As the study points out, Tehran was concerned that the new Iraq would become too close to the United States and was determined to expel the Americans from

the region. To that end, Iran's strategy involved creating instability inside Iraq—ironically mimicking al-Zarqawi's strategy—"placing the responsibility for the chaos on the United States and its Iraqi partners, and ensuring pro-Iranian politicians dominated the new Iraqi Government" (p. 187). The study adds that "[i]n contrast to the insurgents' and Zarqawi's nihilistic but consistent strategies, and Iran's calculated actions, the coalition in early 2004 had trouble formulating a coherent, countrywide strategy" (p. 272). Indeed, it is arguable that—certainly until the arrival of General David H. Petraeus, USA, whose role as commander in Iraq is dealt with in the study's second volume—the coalition had no coherent, viable, and consistent strategy. Moreover, with hindsight it is fair to say that the Iranian strategy worked.

Despite evidence of Iranian activities, the American political and military leadership chose not to confront Tehran directly. As a result, the Iranians penetrated successive Iraqi governments almost without opposition, entrenching themselves in key ministries, notably the Interior Ministry. Neither al-Ja'fari nor al-Maliki did much to prevent Iran's growing influence, and what motivated both leaders was a desire to suppress the Sunni population to the greatest extent possible. To that end, they continually tolerated war crimes committed by the various Shia militias. Al-Maliki in particular was adept at fobbing off General Casey's protests with the dubious argument that he feared a revival of the Baathists.

There is no denying that the Army and Marine Corps, supported to some extent by Iraqi and coalition forces, did achieve some notable tactical victories, such as the battles of Fallujah in 2004 and Tall 'Afar in 2005. On the whole, however, these victories were short-lived, again because there were insufficient numbers of American troops to remain in place to preserve these and other hard-fought victories. Casey's working assumption (which reflected Rumsfeld's preferences)—that the conduct of operations, including control of liberated cities and towns, could be handed over to the Iraqis—simply was not borne out. Iraqi forces were undermanned and, with the exception of some special forces units, were more loyal to their ethnic confreres than to the Iraqi government. Shia troops, and especially police, had no problem hunting down Sunnis who may or may not have been insurgents; they did not go after fellow Shias, however—all of which suited the Shia-led government.

The Army War College study also highlights the degree to which Washington suffered from the delusion that the holding of elections was a sign of progress toward a democratic Iraq. In January 2005, Iraq held an election for a provisional government, and al-Ja'fari became prime minister. Iraq held a second set of elections in December 2005, and al-Ja'fari retained his post. The elections, especially those of December, buoyed both Washington and the U.S. leadership in Iraq; they took them as evidence of the country's evolution into a real democracy.

Washington overvalued the importance of elections in a country riven by far deeper divisions, however. The Sunnis boycotted the January election, with the result that those elected did not fully represent the Iraqi population. Recognizing that they had erred in not participating in the vote, Sunni leaders believed that overwhelming participation by the Sunnis in the December election would result in their dominance of the new government. That did not happen, because, as the study makes clear, the Sunni leadership deluded themselves that Sunnis, not Shias, were the majority population of Iraq. Instead of fostering greater participation by the Sunnis in a new government, the elections solidified Sunni hostility toward both the Shias and the coalition, and the insurgency and the civil war continued apace.

By the summer of 2006, it was clear that the American strategy had failed. President Bush lost confidence in his military and civilian leadership and began the search for a new strategy that ultimately would be labeled the “surge.” It is at this point that the first volume of the Army War College study ends. Bush would replace Rumsfeld in the aftermath of the 2006 congressional elections and bring Casey back in January 2007 as Army Chief of Staff. The surge under the leadership of General Petraeus would prove a success—only to be undermined by President Barack H. Obama’s 2009 decision to withdraw forces from Iraq. The departure of the remaining American troops in December 2011 removed any brake that might have existed on al-Maliki’s determination to ensure Shia dominance in Iraq at the expense of the Sunni community. The ensuing situation in Iraq was the proximate cause of the emergence of ISIS and ultimately worked to the benefit of Iran, whose influence over the fortunes of Iraq continues to grow to this day.