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From 'shock and awe' to 'hearts and minds': the fall and rise of US counterinsurgency capability in Iraq

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From ‘Shock and Awe’ to ‘Hearts and Minds’: the fall and rise of US counterinsurgency capability in Iraq

KALEV I SEPP

ABSTRACT This article recounts the initial difficulties of the US occupation of Iraq that enabled the growth and maturation of the Iraqi insurgency. The focus will be on how the US military adapted, while in combat, to a situation for which its prior training and doctrinal focus had left it ill prepared. The article will explain the challenges faced by military leaders to move from a hierarchical, cold war-designed approach to warfare, to a more adaptive, decentralised mode of operations that requires distributed authority and decision making. The story will be told from the perspective of two strategic planners who helped shape the campaign plan for the coalition forces in Iraq, including the challenges they encountered when attempting to unify all elements of US national power against the Iraqi insurgency.

It was going to be the first war won by the new doctrine of ‘Rapid Dominance’, delivering devastating firepower to ‘shock and awe’ the government and people of an entire nation-state into submission within days. Late on the evening of 19 March 2003, unsleeping video cameras caught the thunderous beginning of the aerial bombardment of Baghdad by Anglo-American warplanes and missiles. Yet, when the capital fell to allied troops barely two weeks later, their military commanders found none of the paralysis promised by the author of the theory of ‘shock and awe’, defence industry consultant Harlan Ullman.¹ Instead, vicious surprise attacks by bands of Saddamist guerrillas hindered the advance of fighting units and crippled the truck-borne flow of supplies into Iraq. These fanatical assaults were the harbingers of the long insurgent war that the same invading troops are struggling against four years on.² Yet the war has changed markedly, and much of the US Army and Marine Corps with it. Few officers still advocate bombing and shelling the enemies they encounter as a matter of course. They and their soldiers and marines now seek to convince the Iraqi people to support the newly elected government and its policies. To achieve this, the invaders-turned-occupation-troops have had to try to gain the respect of the mass of ordinary Iraqi citizens—to win both their ‘hearts and minds’.

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The change in the manner and intent of military operations in Iraq is so fundamental that general officers wonder aloud if the lieutenants and captains, on whom they rely to fight battles, are now experts in counter-insurgency. And, thus, are no longer capable of the conventional World War II-style combat, which is still the preferred ‘American Way of War’.³

The ‘American Way of War’ meets Iraqi reality

This shift in war-fighting philosophy, away from ‘seeking and destroying’ foes to an embrace of the population as the critical objective in modern conflict, has been slow and exceedingly incomplete. However, because it is the only approach military forces can take with any reasonable hope of success in Iraq, it must be pursued. It has taken three hard years of give-and-take clashes and bitter losses to mines and ambushes to bring the Army and Marine Corps to where they now comprehend the character of the war they fight. Since academics at the various war colleges and military service schools teach that understanding is essential at the beginning of a war, there is due concern that this knowledge may have come too late. This failure has fuelled the insurgency and extended it, and may be judged one day to have contributed to its success and to the US-led coalition’s failure. It is worth considering why it took these three irrecoverable years for the US military to move away from the doctrine of ‘shock and awe’, to begin seeking to convert ‘hearts and minds’ to their cause.

After April 2003 the US military lost the initiative it had gained in the invasion phase. The arrival of General George Casey and his staff a year later to replace Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez and his understaffed headquarters energised the military effort. Nevertheless, General Casey’s Multi-National Force – Iraq is still catching up with the many opponents they now face. The insurgency was a huge challenge to the US military—not just to its unarmoured troop-carrying vehicles, but also to its mindset about how to fight a war. As Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld admonished, ‘You go to war with the Army you have. They’re not the Army you might want or wish to have at a later time.’⁴ The military organisation he directed in 2003 was optimal and optimised for conventional warfare. Its leaders expected to fight a short, sharp battle in Iraq and quickly return home. The invasion was well executed but, as is widely agreed, its aftermath was not.⁵

The US military, as an institution, was not prepared to fight more than one kind of war. Some individuals ‘got it’, as per the popular phrase denoting due understanding of a situation, but the institution did not. Tactically the sergeants, lieutenants and captains tended to adapt quickly and well. Among those senior officers who appreciated the character of post-invasion Iraq was then-Major General Pete Chiarelli, who prepared himself and his division for the urban battleground of Baghdad by visiting Texas cities to learn how their governments and services functioned. While successfully restarting the economy of northern Iraq, then Major General Dave Petraeus used the metaphor ‘money is ammunition’ to encourage his officers’ use of emergency relief funds to get Iraqis back to work on recovery projects.⁶ The phrase

itself, however, revealed the degree to which his officers and soldiers had believed that firepower was the solution to all problems.

There were also commanders with a more traditional, or classic, perspective. During 2004 then Major General Ray Odierno commanded the US division in Baghdad. He recalled that he took as his primary mission the protection of his own troops. It is a noble sentiment and an admirable goal, true to the values of American officers. However, it placed the welfare of his soldiers absolutely above that of the Iraqi people, who expected the Americans to provide for their security, as the Iraqi army and police could not. It would be as if police in the USA shot anyone who threatened them, or seemed to threaten them, or seemed to be capable of threatening them, as they patrolled the highways and byways of the USA and its vast urban conglomerations. This inward logic led Major General Odierno to order mass arrests of hundreds of civilians when pursuing a few insurgents, enraging and embittering formerly friendly or neutral Iraqis caught in these sweeps. He eventually gave the order to his troops to ‘increase lethality’ in their operations. His top priority in counterinsurgency, he said, was to obtain the best possible weapons and equipment for his soldiers—to help protect them from the threats they faced.⁷ How this type of mission-focus might help Iraq become a functional and viable nation-state, however, is far from clear. What it does reflect is how military staff schools and war colleges trained senior commanders after Vietnam. In the post-Vietnam era commanders were encouraged to view their assigned terrain not as towns and farms with populations and property to secure, but as a battlefield, devoid of civilians, where firepower could be brought to bear on an opposing army without hesitation.⁸

In Iraq the objectives of the USA are fundamentally political. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld declared in November 2006, just before his resignation, that in Iraq: ‘the problem is not a military problem. In fact, the reality is that it’s a political governance problem, and it’s a governmental problem, and it’s a problem of reconciliation.’⁹ Referring to the Iraqi Security Forces, defence analyst Tom Donnelly said: ‘There isn’t yet an Iraq to defend...A nation, as well as an army, needs to be stood up.’¹⁰ The attainment of these objectives is at least as dependent on the success of civic action and economic development as they are on any military force. The slow advance of civic improvement has delayed the termination of violence and undermined any dissipation of the insurgency. Military support of civic programmes is essential, as no other agency has the material resources, numbers, and quality of personnel and wherewithal to implement these critical programmes in the austere and hostile environment of an armed insurgency.

In the foreign policy toolbox the US military wields a sledgehammer, at the same time as the US State Department holds a jeweller’s screwdriver. The State Department only controls \$30 billion in annual foreign assistance, the same amount spent in a single month by the Department of Defense in Iraq. The US military will not receive help from the State Department. The State Department will not fundamentally change, despite recent positive initiatives

to increase the presence of its Foreign Service corps outside embassies overseas. The organisation, manning, budgeting, direction and leadership of an effective full-blooded civil–military operation to achieve US objectives in Iraq have not been formalised. The US military must have this ready capacity in order to be able to meet whatever requirements and goals the White House and the Congress set for them. For three decades after the end of the Vietnam war, ‘irregular’ warfare was a bad word in the US military, equating to ‘abnormal’. Irregular warfare is now regular—it is the norm for combat in the new century.¹¹

Three years into the battle for Iraq, there are unsettling signs that the US Army’s adaptation to small wars is uneven. Two concurrent and contrasting stories from the war zone illustrate this. In February 2006 Tom Lasseter of the Knight-Ridder news organisation, embedded with the 101st Airborne Division, reported a telling incident in the contested town of Samarra. Elements of the division’s 187th Infantry Regiment, known by their nickname the ‘Rakkasans’, were based in a concrete-walled fortress in the centre of town. The official designation of the outpost was Patrol Base Uvannie, but the besieged troops there called it ‘The Alamo’. Lasseter witnessed an American soldier manning a heavy machine gun shoot and kill an unarmed Iraqi man because he walked into an ‘exclusion zone’—which the troops called a ‘kill zone’—that extended 100 yards out from the concrete barrier walls of the base. As the Iraqi lay dying with a 50-calibre bullet wound through his body, he pointed at a little building in front of him and said in broken English, to the US medics who rushed to his side, helpless to save him: ‘This is my house’. He had simply been walking home. The colonel commanding the regiment had sternly declared, ‘The Rakkasans don’t do warning shots’. The late-arriving lieutenant on the scene fully understood that killing the Iraqi man, in a society where honour and revenge are paramount created 15 new insurgents. The soldier who killed the Iraqi civilian railed to the reporter that he didn’t understand why he was in Iraq.¹²

At the same time, also in the conflictive west of Iraq, another journalist reported a story on another regiment, but with a very different cast. In a series of feature articles, the *Washington Post*’s Tom Ricks described the operations of the Third Armored Cavalry Regiment in Tall Afar, and the relative success of the Americans’ efforts there. He noted that, months before the unit left the USA, the regimental commander conducted a long and comprehensive intellectual preparation of his troops for this kind of war, not just tactical training. His officers and sergeants made their way through extensive reading lists. They studied and discussed historical cases of counter-insurgencies, focusing on subjects like population security and control. Once in Iraq, they planned their operations in conjunction with the Iraqi security forces. In the battle for Tall Afar the Iraqis accepted their share of responsibility for clearing the city, and in the end suffered more casualties than the Americans. The regimental commander received a letter of thanks from the mayor praising his troops for ridding the town of insurgents—but more, for helping re-establish the municipal government, resolving political

disputes and developing the police and public services. The mayor called the cavalrymen ‘Lionhearts’, which is the stuff of martial legend.¹³

This marked contrast between two regiments of the same army shouldn’t exist. Yet, as late as December 2005, a US Army brigade commander arriving in Iraq admitted he had only learned his unit’s primary mission—to train Iraqi security forces—as his troops were moving into their sector of responsibility.¹⁴ Why are army units and leaders sometimes so baffled by their tasks in a counterinsurgency war? In part there is a fundamental misstatement of their overarching mission in Iraq. The Defense Department’s strategic plan in 2006 highlights the future mission of ‘stability operations’. This infers that in present and future wars the US military will be working to restore a country in conflict, or in a post-conflict situation, to its pre-conflict ‘status quo’. But US national policy intends that almost everything in Iraq will be wholly different than before. Thus, the USA, its embassy and its armed forces are not trying to stabilise Iraq. They are, rather, fundamentally destabilising an entire country and everything in it.

The presence of uninvited foreign military troops in any country is by itself destabilising. Simultaneously a new government is to be instituted—a Stalinist dictatorship will be replaced by a representative democracy that is still responsive to tribal and religious structures. There will be a new economy: the previous Marxist-style command economy, with its oil-funded welfare programmes, will be replaced by free-market capitalism. A new media environment with a free press and freedom of expression will succeed the censored state-controlled propaganda machine run by Saddam Hussein. Iraqis will have a new security system—the Iraqi Gestapo of Saddam’s regime will be replaced with an uniformed civil police force, chartered to protect rather than terrorise the citizenry. Iraq will have a new diplomatic standing, and new relations with Turkey, Syria, Iran, Israel, the USA and the rest of the world. Very significantly a new society is in the making. Iraq will no longer be dominated by the Sunnis, but instead ethnically and politically federated, with a strong Shi’ia—and hence Iranian—influence.

From conventional war to security and development in Iraq?

Is it really possible for the US Army to undertake this work, now and in the future? This misdirection of the US military’s effort is possibly the result of a fundamental mis-statement of its mission. As mentioned above, the Defense Department’s 2006 strategic plan highlights the future mission of ‘stability operations’, implying that US armed forces will be working to restore a country in conflict, or in a post-conflict situation, to its pre-conflict ‘status quo’. Conflict and instability are associated with insurgents and guerrilla fighters, but upholding the old order in any given nation may be contrary to what is necessary to undermine and eliminate the insurgency threatening it.

Call it militant Wilsonianism, call it expeditionary democracy, call it counterinsurgency, but this is not ‘return to status quo’, and it is decidedly not stabilising. It is an overturning of nations. It is, at its core, a revolution.

American soldiers are the instruments of this revolution, and its implementers as well. The army would have to lead revolutions on a scale so vast as to completely eclipse what the USA experienced in breaking from Great Britain's imperial rule, or in reconstructing the defeated slave states of the South following the American Civil War. The US Armed Forces, and the US Army in particular must shoulder the burden of these tremendous tasks because there is simply no other agency or department in the US government that can do the job.

The widely varied and distributed character of the insurgency in Iraq hindered an intellectual grasp of the situation for many leaders. It is a patchwork or mosaic conflict, what Marine General Charles Krulak described as a 'three-block war'. On three contiguous city blocks, he suggested, one could simultaneously find humanitarian aid being distributed, a civil disturbance being quelled, and all-out combat being fought.¹⁵ Regarding the subject of insurgency itself, there was considerable interest, research and writing on insurgency and counterinsurgency in the 1960s. However, so much of the global political structure has changed, that it is not possible simply to reapply 1960s theories and doctrines to the present uprising in Iraq.

The insurgents in particular have changed dramatically. During the Cold War most insurgent groups' objective was to seize power, directly and plainly. Now it is more likely that these organisations will attempt to act as 'spoilers'. For example, in Iraq the numerous resistance groups, while not necessarily operating in collusion with one another, are nonetheless making important portions of the country ungovernable. Insurgents used to rely on logistical support from the local population where they operated (this was Mao Zedong's approach to guerrilla warfare, necessitated by the remoteness of the regions of China where he battled the Japanese and the Kuomintang). Now they exploit the internet to manage their finances, which are provided from sympathisers around the world. Insurgency expert Tom Marks explains that last century's insurgents used terror as a tactic—a 'method of action'. This century's insurgents employ terror as a 'logic of action', believing the use of terror to be self-justifying. In their effort to tear down the existing global political system, terror is its own rationale.¹⁶

American military strategic culture has retarded the transition of military operations from conventional to unconventional warfare. The strategist Jeffrey Record notes that, especially since the First World War, the leaders of US armed forces have revealed a consistent pattern of behaviour. They are predisposed to be: 1) apolitical, reflecting an ethic of subordination to civilian political authority; 2) a-strategic, focused on winning battles and campaigns, not on winning wars; and 3) ahistorical, extending from a misplaced belief that new situations render the study of history unnecessary, beyond regard for sentimental historical touchstones and tactical vignettes extolling the central martial value of courage under fire.¹⁷

In actuality American military culture is grounded in the simple principals of firepower and mass. Mirroring both strengths and a notable weakness of the broader American society, its military forces are highly reliant on technology and logistics, and generally ignorant of cultures beyond their

borders. There is a profound desire in war to 'do it fast, do it alone'. In expeditionary warfare in particular, allies have tended to be viewed by US staffs as minor contingents, less well-equipped and something of a burden imposed on them by political leaders, impeding efficient and rapid execution of the assigned military objective. A serving four-star general wrote at the conclusion of the 1991 Gulf war that it was 'the first coalition war the United States has fought since the Second World War'.¹⁸ This recollection was wholly ignorant of reality, no matter how one chose to interpret the term 'coalition', and showed evidence of a dismissive attitude towards non-American units. It was striking that the writer was a two time veteran of the Vietnam war, where the US forces assisted the larger South Vietnamese military. Further, his senior commanders and ranking sergeants in Vietnam were veterans of the Korean war, where Americans fought alongside not only the sizeable South Korean army but numerous United Nations units as well. The Iraq war has pointedly shown that the value of allies in a counter-insurgency linked to global terrorist movements cannot be underestimated or overstated.

For the USA the most important alliance in Iraq is with the Iraqis themselves. The attainment of US policy objectives is almost wholly dependent on the Iraqis—without their direct engagement and help, the USA alone cannot create the conditions for success. It follows, then, that a military doctrine of 'shock and awe' on the scale that Ullman claimed was necessary to debilitate Iraq, would also make the Iraqi state incapable of recovering from the widespread physical destruction and slaughter that would accompany such a massive attack. The real examples of this are post-Second World War Germany and Japan, which suffered through an extended version of 'shock and awe' because the technical means of pinpoint delivery of explosives now available was lacking to the Allies. Instead, it took three years of constant aerial carpet-bombing for the British and Americans to achieve the devastation required to compel the diminishing populations of those nation-states to capitulate (not forgetting their conquest by the huge Russian and Anglo-American ground armies). Afterwards they lived amid ruins for over two years before the faintest beginnings of an economic rebuilding could be managed—and that was only enabled with the largest foreign aid offering ever made by the USA.¹⁹

As the situation has clarified, is it now possible to predict the future in Iraq? The central concerns are about the anticipated length of the current conflict, and how much it will cost the USA to see it through. Proposals have been forwarded recommending that US interests can be served by variously withdrawing all US troops into large fortified bases, where they could eat 31 flavours of ice cream and guard only their own perimeter. It is unclear how the imagined threat of force represented by the simple presence of combat units confined to these isolated bases—'self-administering prisoner-of-war camps', as defense analyst Terry Daly calls them—would support the attainment of US policy goals.²⁰ Another proposal is to withdraw all combat troops completely, and only commit a small number of military advisers to aid the Iraqi security forces.²¹

Leaving the Iraqi security forces in an immature and vulnerable stage of their development opens the possibility of a ‘worst case scenario’—a repeat of the Mosul police mass desertions, or the collapse of elements of the Iraqi Army in Al Anbar province, potentially on a larger scale. The resulting chaos could invite intervention by neighbouring nation-states to advance their interests in Iraq and the region. The outcomes might be the balkanisation of Iraq, or the emergence of a new Iraqi strongman in the mould of Saddam Hussein, or a combination of these undesirable conclusions. In any case, if the flow of oil to global markets is threatened, military action may be unavoidable. It is not beyond the realm of the possible that the USA could find itself in the position of leading another invasion of Iraq within a decade of the first to make right what was allowed to go wrong for the sake of expedience.

The other option is to be patient and progressive. As with other counter-insurgencies, this campaign will evolve over time, will not be quick and will demand patience. However, it can be successful. The insurgency cannot continue at its current level of violence indefinitely. If the US-led coalition takes the steps to unify its security operations with those of governance and economic development, the population, upon which the insurgents depend, will see progress and increasingly withdraw support from or even oppose the insurgents. The Iraqi armed forces and police are growing in size and capability, despite insurgent attacks and terrorism. Several major cities are now in Iraqi hands and more will return to Iraqi government control in the future, and US and British commanders at all levels believe that more Iraqi units will be able to take charge of their assigned zones within a year or two.

Daily combat operations by US and coalition forces are absolutely critical to progress in these sectors. Without their presence, at this moment when the new nation-state is most vulnerable, the insurgents would certainly triumph, plunging Iraq into civil war and the region into chaos. The nascent Iraqi security forces—both the army and the police—openly admit to their need for broad assistance to protect the Iraqi people from the insurgents and their tacit collaborators, armed and organised criminals. To determine the practicality of these options, and all the other suggestions of courses of action, the nature of the war in Iraq must be examined to determine how the war has changed over time—and whether the US military has changed with it.

There has been an epistemological debate over the meaning of ‘insurgency’ and ‘civil war’, presented as separate and distinct forms of conflict and implying that one is fought in some very separate way from the other. The US military’s own Joint Publication 1–02 spells out their definitions, and reveals only the most subtle of differences. An insurgency, this military dictionary says, is an organised movement aimed at overthrowing a central or regional government, or forcing a change in policies, through subversion and violence. A civil war is a violent conflict within a country, fought by organised groups that aim to take power at the centre or in a region, or to change government policies.²² The scholar of civil wars, James Fearon, posits that the difference between the two lies only in degree of violence and fatalities.²³

From the Weinberger–Powell Doctrine to Rapid Dominance and beyond

The USA will continue to use force—contrary to the Weinberger and Powell Doctrines—in defence of less-than-vital national interests. The purpose of the Weinberger–Powell Doctrine was to create a fundamental mechanism to avoid an unconsidered rush into another Vietnam-type conflict, which the US military proved unsuited and/or unable to prosecute to a successful conclusion. The memory of the painful humiliation suffered by the American armed forces in Vietnam, particularly by the army, might seem to ensure that these strategic adventures would never be repeated, especially with a reinforcing checklist doctrine issued by the Secretary of Defense to safeguard against it. However, the promise of swift and easy military victories described in Ullman's 'Rapid Dominance' theory of warfighting overcame all these cautions. Further, the theory exacerbated a gross imbalance in the staff, resources and capabilities between a burgeoning Defense Department on the one hand, and a static and short-handed State Department, on the other hand. In this context, the militarisation of US foreign policy described by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Dana Priest was inevitable.²⁴

This militarisation of the USA's international relations was expressed most starkly by the use of the US ground forces, the army in particular, as the leading 'instrument of policy' in reordering the political structure of the Middle East. It is questionable whether US ground forces are suited to conduct the sort of 'small war' that the insurgency (or civil war) in Iraq has become. A small war is defined by the strategist Carnes Lord in terms of the pre-eminence of political considerations in its prosecution.²⁵ Because of the use of the term 'small', the issue of scale can be misleading. The wars in El Salvador, Colombia, the Philippines and Afghanistan are small by calculus of their numbers—but the conflicts in Korea and Vietnam and now Iraq, despite the hundreds of thousands of American troops engaged, were and are ultimately small wars as well.

Throughout the Cold War the US Army's real focus was on preparing to fight World War Three in Europe. Since 2000 the priority of the former Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, was for the military to concentrate on the 'transformation' of its services to fight rapid, decisive expeditions in preference to long, grinding counterinsurgencies. In 1965 French author and journalist Bernard Fall assessed the 20th century to be the 'century of small wars'. He noted that 'big wars'—that is, the two world wars—were actually aberrations, as would be a major war between the USA and China.²⁶ But a large-scale conventional war with China is the kind of war the US Army seeks to fight. Writer and analyst Robert Kaplan has drawn attention to the Pentagon's plans for new fleets of super-destroyers, cruise missiles, stealth fighters and air-transportable mini-tanks to counter the supposed coming threat of China. If the USA wants to impress China, he countered, then it needs to succeed in Iraq.²⁷

The military's transition from the 'shock and awe' approach to warfare to dealing with the conflict and instability associated with insurgents and guerrilla fighters was impeded by the ban on the word 'guerrillas' by then

Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld. It is a useful term, although the combatants so labelled have been underestimated before. In 1962, on the cusp of the large-scale US commitment to the Vietnam war, the well decorated Chief of Staff of the US Army and World War Two veteran, General George Decker, dismissively asserted: 'Any good soldier can handle guerrillas'.²⁸

Combat against insurgents (or 'guerrillas') in Iraq reveals all the contradictions in the US Army and, in a similar way, the Marines. Counterinsurgency operations are small, both relatively and absolutely. In the Greek Civil War, the Hukbalahap rebellion in the Philippines, the hunt for Ernesto Ché Guevara in Bolivia, and the civil war in El Salvador, the 'unit of action' was actually individuals. In all cases it was ultimately single advisors, defense attachés and small teams of specialists who had influence out of all proportion to their small numbers. The classic army, in contrast, embraces mass. Its framework components for operations are brigades, divisions and corps—units of thousands. Exacerbating this oversized organisation is officers' excessive study of the Civil War and World War Two, which showcase these large units. The army is fixated on what soldier-scholar John Waghelstein calls 'the sine curve of mobilization, world war, then de-mobilization'.²⁹

In terms of time, counterinsurgency operations are slow and patient. Its practitioners accept the necessity of long-term social changes essential to eliminate conditions that fuel anti-government sentiment and violence. Yet the classic army strives for speed, tactically, operationally and strategically. In 1862 President Abraham Lincoln issued General Orders 100, also known as the Lieber Code, which is the basis of the present US Law of Land Warfare. GO 100 introduced the premise of a 'short, sharp war' as being more humane and less destructive than a long war which might be more careful of property and the lives of non-combatants.³⁰ This approach plays to US technological, industrial and logistical strengths, combining with mass to create inertia, and reinforcing the conventional combat leader's value of 'offensive-mindedness'.

To prosecute a counterinsurgency, a nation-state requires allies of all stripes. This is especially true in the 21st century, with the need for the legitimacy bestowed by the approval of the UN in order to garner support from global public opinion. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, the classic army prefers to fight alone. Allies slow them down, and complicate the planning and conduct of operations. It doesn't help that, with the end of the Cold War, European military budgets have been slashed, and now their forces' technologies and expertise lag behind the well funded US services. Only the miniscule European special operations units integrate readily into US military commands.

Counterinsurgency operations are decentralised, with authority as well as responsibility devolving to the lowest level of command. They are not a single war, but a hundred different wars, each unique to its valley, village, district or neighbourhood. In Iraq the most effective unit commanders decentralised their units. One lieutenant colonel said, 'I delegate authority until I feel uncomfortable, and then I know I've got it about right'.³¹ In these units, for

the first time, the captains commanding companies have their own staffs—notably intelligence officers and analysts, drawn from higher headquarters that were designed to fight against Soviet tank armies instead of handfuls of terrorists and fanatics hiding among the population they are charged to protect. The classic army, unfortunately, remains supremely centralised and hierarchical. Its intelligence architecture is still rooted in the Cold War, where information is collected and analysed at the highest level, with the lower echelons ‘informed’ as necessary. The best example of successful decentralised operations in an insurgent environment might be the Viet Cong, who developed the ‘*dau tranh*’ concept. This operational model balanced central objectives, strategy and doctrine with decentralised execution determined by local commanders, who tuned their activities to local conditions. A key element of *dau tranh* was, of course, an attitude of patience.³²

The classic army, then, is focused on the next big war, rather than the small war at hand. So the US Army today is divided, like the Soviet Red Army during their war in Afghanistan. The Russian Eighth Guards Army stationed in East Germany anticipated the big war against the USA and its NATO allies, which never came. This attitude was in contrast to the so-called ‘Afghanistan Club’ of Russian units fighting their ‘small war at hand’. Like the Soviets in Afghanistan, the US forces in Vietnam never lost any battles of significance—but they lost the war. Also the Soviets and the Americans finally figured out how to best prosecute the war, but in both cases, when they did, it was too late to reverse the inertia towards defeat. The Soviet loss of Afghanistan precipitated the loss of Soviet credibility in the global foreign policy arena—just as the USA suffered for a decade after its defeat in the Vietnam war.

The strategist Edward Luttwak wrote an essay in 1983 called ‘Notes on low-intensity warfare’. Although the term has since fallen from proper doctrinal usage, his thesis exposed the fact that the US military had oversimplified its understanding of the so-called ‘Weinberger’ and later ‘Powell’ Doctrines. These doctrines presumed, first, that complete public support of a war is necessary for its commencement and, second, that a vital national interest must be at stake to go to war. However, the first tenet assumes there is no link to the manner in which a war is fought, only to the decision to fight it. Luttwak contended, ‘Public support cannot be demanded up front; it must be earned’.³³ This thesis is being validated today in Iraq. The second supposition forgets that the nature of US global engagement requires protection of merely ‘important’ and ‘other’ interests, not just the lives of the citizens and the territory and of the USA. Career diplomat George Kennan appears to have been right in recognising that the ‘American way of life’, which is absolutely dependent on global business and international partners, is a vital interest.³⁴

The central issue, Luttwak argues, is the army’s ability to comprehend that counterinsurgency is tied to the army’s self-regard. The classic army inflicts casualties by overwhelming firepower, speed and mass—so it focuses internally to optimise its administration of material and personnel resources to achieve maximum efficiency. The clue to this attitude is the incessant use of

football metaphors by military leaders, referring to a sport that is all about power and speed. This ‘inwardly-regarding’ attitude ignores any given enemy and the setting and context of the conflict, fairly in accordance with the mass-reliant Soviet Army’s World War Two maxim: ‘Quantity is quality’.³⁵ The critical flaw in this notion is that it assumes all opponents can be beaten with mass and power and speed. This is not so. In Iraq the firepower-delivery units of the army are finding their targets becoming less and less defined, and more and more dispersed. Despite all historical evidence available before the invasion of Iraq, however, the doctrine of ‘shock and awe’ embraced the opinion that firepower will always win.

What is necessary for small wars such as counterinsurgencies, says Luttwak, is an ‘outwardly-regarding’ force that can find enemy weaknesses, then organise itself to exploit those weaknesses. Further, a large army has a large internal bureaucracy, which is inherently inflexible in any fundamental way, and resistant to adaptation above the level of its smaller tactical units.³⁶ So ‘joint operations’ doesn’t mean the selection of the most appropriate units for a given mission, but the inclusion of all services and all units, with all their platforms and weapons systems—a reflex known among officers as the kids’ soccer league syndrome—‘everyone gets to play’. Contrary to the need for squads and platoons of soldiers to disperse among the local populations, classic army logistics and ‘force protection’ issues drive senior commanders and staffs to consolidate their units in centralised bases. This eases internal organisational functioning, without concern for the situation in Iraq—ignoring the actual reason for being in Iraq.

There are related problems for the army as it confronts the challenge of counterinsurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. The classic army treats all wars the same, and sees them only as scaled differently—yet all small wars are unique and different. The classic army rotates personnel frequently and widely, because it views all personnel as interchangeable—yet small wars require hard-to-learn expertise in a given region, with language and cultural skills, and key personal contacts taking years to acquire. The classic army eschews ‘politics and policy’ as beyond their purview, claiming to be apolitical—but small wars require manipulation of local politics to overcome opponents without having to defeat them in combat. Out-and-out military defeat of an insurgency will not be possible in most conflicts. The classic army is focused on firepower and logistics. In early 2006 the *Washington Times* published a letter from a marine corporal serving in the infantry in Iraq’s Al Anbar province, describing his foxhole-level perspective on combat there. He offered the key to defeating the insurgents in Iraq: ‘We need bigger caliber weapons’.³⁷ The half-inch-diameter slug from the 50-calibre heavy machine gun in service in Iraq is as big as they come, but it isn’t helping the Rakkasans in Samarra.

Small wars can’t be won by the firepower of ‘shock and awe’. Despite the Pentagon’s terribly flawed initial effort at fighting the Iraqi insurgency, the 2005 *Counterinsurgency Survey* ordered by General George Casey, the senior coalition commander in Iraq, showed that elements of the so-called classic army were able to adapt, in notable measure, to the exigencies of the

war. This was especially the case with the younger and more junior military leadership: the sergeants, lieutenants and captains.³⁸ Serious steps are being taken to educate the officers and troops deploying to Iraq about how to fight this kind of small war against an unconventional enemy. At the National Training Center in Death Valley in Southern California, tank battle scenarios have been set aside to provide simulations of day-to-day activities in Iraqi towns, with over 299 Iraqi Americans (hired through the Screen Actors Guild) playing roles as sheikhs, mayors, businessmen, criminals and terrorists. North of Baghdad at Taji, a 'Counterinsurgency Academy' instructs US officers as they arrive on the most up-to-date information they need to survive and perform their mission, in their assigned zone of operations. One of the academy instructors recently advised that, at this stage of the war, no American will ever be able to win the 'hearts and minds' of the Iraqis they are responsible to protect—but they might earn their respect.³⁹

Conclusion: from 'shock and awe' to 'hearts and minds'

Even assuming the classic Big Army could become a New Model Army, capable of successfully engaging in the next century of small wars, there remain questions of national policy, its implementation and its costs. Patience is not widely held as an American virtue. The theory of Rapid Dominance and its brutal adjunct 'shock and awe' appealed to this aggressive streak, and must have 'briefed well' in front of the Pentagon staffs. Yet, in its only real-world test, the theory failed so suddenly and completely that its author immediately criticised his own disciples for not implementing his concept properly, while telling journalists 'shock and awe' was just an informal, unofficial straw-man. As the coalition tank columns approached Baghdad, Harlan Ullman quietly removed the phrase 'father of the doctrine of "Shock and Awe"' from his biography on his personal website.⁴⁰ In the 21st century, even 'short, sharp wars' may still be measured in years. Even if the army disciplines itself to fight long wars, it is not certain the US political process will allow it to. The champion football coach Vince Lombardi once explained, 'I never lost a game, I just ran out of time'. In Iraq and in future small wars, the timeline of American political will may matter more than any capacity its soldiers have to master the ability to win 'hearts and minds' to their cause.

Notes

- 1 Harlan Ullman is Senior Adviser with the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC. See HK Ullman & JP Wade, *Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance*, Washington, DC: National Defense University, 1996. See also H Ullman, *Unfinished Business: Afghanistan, the Middle East, and Beyond—Defusing the Dangers that Threaten America's Security*, Kensington, KS: Citadel Press, 2002; and Ullman, *Finishing Business: Ten Steps to Defeat Global Terror*, Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2004.
- 2 AS Hashim, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006.
- 3 Interviews by author, Baghdad, July–August 2005 and Fort Knox, KY, 11 July 2006.
- 4 W Branigin, 'Bush, Rumsfeld pledge to protect troops', *Washington Post*, 9 December 2004.
- 5 MR Gordon & BE Trainor, *COBRA II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq*, New York: Pantheon, 2006; and TE Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*, New York:

- Penguin, 2006. For an overview of the growing number of memoirs and personal accounts by participants and journalists, see T Dodge, 'How Iraq was lost', *Survival*, 48 (4), 2006–07, pp 157–172.
- 6 PW Chiarelli & PR Michaelis, 'Winning the peace: the requirement for full-spectrum operations', *Military Review*, July–August 2005; and MR Gordon, '101st Airborne scores success in reconstruction of Northern Iraq', *New York Times*, 4 September 2003.
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 - 16 TA Marks, 'Colombian army adaptation to FARC insurgency', Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, Carlisle, PA, 2005.
 - 17 J Record, 'The American way of war: cultural barriers to successful counterinsurgency', *Cato Institute Policy Analysis* 577, 1 September 2006.
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