American Military Performance in IRAQ

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PHOTO: U.S. Marines of the 1st Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment, Regimental Combat Team 7, wait in an alley while searching for insurgents and weapons during Operation Al Fajr. Photo taken 9 November 2004. (DoD)

IT HAS BECOME COMMONPLACE to blame the neoconservatives in the Bush administration for the confusion and continued bloodshed in Iraq. But as we enter the fourth year of the Iraq war, it is not too early to stand back and review our military performance in order to maintain some perspective. Below are several observations.

1 The insurgency in Iraq was based on the Sunni rejection of democracy. Saddam did not rule alone. His enforcers—and those who shared in the plunder—were predominantly Sunni. American and British troops liberated the Kurds and Shiites from their Sunni oppressors. The essential confusion about Iraq stems from a lack of candor by American leaders in acknowledging that democracy stripped the Sunnis of their power. Were it not for the American occupation of the Sunni areas north and west of Iraq, the fragile Shiite-based democracy stood no chance of taking root. Most Sunnis viewed as illegitimate the presence of the American troops, whom they call "occupiers," which by definition they are.

Accustomed to dominating and oppressing the Kurds and Shiites, the Sunni population sympathized with, and were intimidated by, the insurgents who freely mixed with them in the marketplaces. Yet instead of being forthright about the Sunni bedrock of the insurgency, American officials too often suggested that most Sunnis also supported democracy, but were intimidated by shadowy insurgents.

True, the insurgents are deadly intimidators. Beyond that, however, deeply held religious beliefs and tribal patterns of social behavior take decades to change. Efforts to include Sunnis in the Iraqi Army are laudable. In addition, for years there have been negotiations to coax the insurgent Sunni "rejectionist" leaders to stop fighting, much as the British encouraged the Irish Republican Army to cease attacks in northern Ireland. Unfortunately, these political talks have not yet yielded results.

2 The major intelligence failure was deeming culture an illegitimate subject of analysis. Virtually all Western intelligence agencies believed Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction; the reasons for being misled were understandable. The real failure was not seeing that Iraq had fallen apart as a cohesive society. The evidence was widespread. The British engineers and Marines who seized the "Crown Jewel" in March of 2003—the pumping station north of Basra that facilitated a multibillion dollar flow of oil—were appalled to see scrubby grass, broken windows, open cesspools, and vital equipment deteriorating into junk.

Common eyesores in Iraqi cities are the heaps of garbage outside the walls of the houses. Inside the courtyards, tiny patches of grass are as well tended as the putting greens on golf courses. A generation of oppression had taught the society to take care only of its own, to enrich the family, and to avoid

any communal activity that attracted attention and charges of deviant political behavior. The society fell apart, with each family and subtribe caring only for itself.

The civilian neoconservatives in the Bush administration were convinced that Iraq's educated middle class, so in evidence a half-century ago, would reemerge as the enlightened, moderate leadership. The intelligence community, trained to report only on technical, quantitative "hard data" and to regard cultural and societal variables as the province of novelists, ignored the critical deficiency in Iraq: the dearth of leadership caused by decades of tyrannical greed. No enlightened middle class was waiting to emerge and to bring together the best and brightest Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds. Responsible Iraqi leadership was the commodity in least supply in post-Saddam Iraq.

AP

L. Paul Bremer, left, speaks to the media on arrival at Baghdad airport on 12 May 2003. Bremer replaced retired Army LTG Jay Garner, right, as the American civilian administrator in Iraq.

3 The critical military error was abolishing unity of command in 2003. During the march to Baghdad, General Tommy Franks, commanding U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), fiercely warded off "suggestions" from the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) prior to the war, insisting that unity of command was essential in war. Prior to his retirement, however, Franks in May of 2003 supported the White House in removing Lieutenant General Jay Garner as the deputy in CENTCOM responsible for reconstruction. Franks fully endorsed the creation of an entirely new organization under Ambassador L. Paul Bremer.

Bremer's appointment replaced unity of command with two chains of command. He was given the authority to decide the policies and the budget for all Iraqi security forces; CENTCOM retained responsibility for ensuring security until the Iraqis were capable of taking over. This stripped Army General John P. Abizaid, who became CENTCOM commander in late June, of command authority over the Iraqi security forces. Authority was divided from responsibility, a breach of organizational commonsense compounded by the antagonism between the two separate staffs.

The United States foundered for the first critical year after seizing Baghdad. We were in the midst of a war, but a civilian ambassador, not Abizaid, had the power—and the ear of the president. Unity of command was shattered. The U.S. military had scant influence on the mission, composition, and leadership of the Iraqi security forces. Ambassador Bremer and a handful of staff thrown together in a few months were making decisions about the missions, budgets, size, and training of the Iraqi security forces. This organizational decision made no sense.

4 The disbanding of the Iraqi Army in May 2003 changed the mission of the American soldiers from liberators to occupiers. The Iraqi Army melted away in April of 2003, but it was eager to regroup in order to gain pay, jobs, and prestige. Indeed, the American battalion commanders paying the Iraqi officers and soldiers a pittance for their years of service reported that they could easily reconstitute trained battalions. Central Command and the JCS, however, did not object to Bremer's swift decision to abolish the army. With no Iraqi security force, the U.S. military forces moved alone into the Sunni cities.

The Sunni imams promptly proclaimed it was the duty of true Muslims to oppose the infidel occupiers. The imams seized the power vacuum left when the army melted away. Sunni officers and Baathist officials went to ground, unsure what fate awaited them. The mosques emerged as the center of information, rumor, and gradual resistance.

5 The salutary effect of more boots on the ground in 2003 has been exaggerated. Had the 4th Infantry Division attacked in March 2003 through Turkey as planned and then to the north of Baghdad, there would have been more U.S. units in the Sunni area. Alternatively, the 1st Infantry Division could have landed in Kuwait.

The net effect of another division immediately after Baghdad fell, though, is unclear because CENTCOM was not issuing firm orders to the divisions. When Baghdad fell, the population was joyous and in awe of the Americans. When CENTCOM did not order American forces to stop the looting, American forces lost the respect of the Iraqis. More American troops in the Sunni area immediately after the fall of Baghdad would have substantially dampened the insurgency—if Iraqi security forces joined the Americans. But the decision to disband the Iraqi Army foreclosed this. Dispatching more American Soldiers to fight alone in the Sunni triangle would not have prevented the emergence of the insurgency.

6 The insurgency began gradually, and picked up steam. Recently it has become conventional wisdom to argue that the fedayeen encountered on the march to Baghdad in 2003 constituted the vanguard of an insurgency that had been planned in advance. This myth persists, despite exhaustive interviews of captured generals who laughed at the notion that delinquent teenagers recruited by Saddam's pathological son constituted the essence of their strategy.

The insurgency began gradually in the summer of 2003, as diverse gangs of disaffected Sunni youths and former soldiers heeded the urgings from imams and Baathists. Their tactics were trial and error, and the attacks increased as awe of the Americans and their armor dissipated.

7 2004 was a year of military setbacks due to imprudent political-military decisionmaking. Although facing an insurgency, American operations remained decentralized, with most division commanders focused on unilateral offensive operations. This was the wrong focus because American sweeps and raids could not attrit the insurgent manpower pool of a million disaffected Sunni youths. The U.S. divisions lacked a field commander who would curb their natural instinct for decisive battle and lay out a thoughtful counterinsurgency plan. Anbar Province, the heart of the Sunni insurgency, degenerated in 2004. April was a month of disasters. Calls for jihad swept across the province, and Baghdad was reduced to a few days of fuel and fresh food. Fallujah erupted when four American contractors were murdered and their bodies dismembered on the main street. Washington and Baghdad ordered the reluctant Marines to attack the city of 300,000 in early April.

Simultaneously, Bremer decided to move against the dangerous Shiite demagogue, Moqtada al-Sadr. American troops were thus engaged on two fronts—against Sunnis in Anbar and Fallujah and against Shiites in Baghdad and Najaf. At Fallujah in late April, the White House and Bremer, taking counsel of their fears that Iraq would fall apart because of adverse publicity about the assault, ordered the astonished Marines to pull back just as Major General James Mattis was squeezing the insurgents into a corner.

Former Sunni generals came forward, claiming they could bring order to Fallujah. The Marines, to the chagrin of the civilians in Baghdad and Washington, turned the city over to the generals and a "Fallujah brigade" that included the insurgents. In Najaf, al-Sadr was cornered, but the American officials in Baghdad decided not to press home the attack. Within a month in Fallujah, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and foreign fighters took control, driving out the former Iraqi generals. By the summer of 2004, Iraq was a military mess.

8 Turnaround in 2005. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Abizaid agreed that Army General George W. Casey should take command in the summer 2004. Casey promptly put down a second uprising by Sadr, then insisted that the interim Iraqi government support a full assault against Fallujah. In November of 2004, 70 Americans died in bitter house-to-house fighting that destroyed half the city.

Casey then undertook a systematic campaign to seal the Syrian border and flush the insurgents out of Mosul and Talafar in the north. Most important, Lieutenant General David Petraeus took over the training of the Iraqi Army and deployed a 10-man advisory team with each battalion. Casey insisted that every Iraqi battalion partner with an American battalion.

The result in one year was a remarkable turnaround. The insurgents had learned not to challenge the Americans to a stand-up fight. The Iraqi soldiers, perhaps

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Commander of U.S. Central Command, GEN John Abizaid, U.S. Army, answers a reporter's question during a media interview with Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld and Commander of Multi-National Force Iraq, GEN George Casey Jr., U.S. Army, in Baghdad, Iraq, on 11 February 2005. Rumsfeld made a surprise visit to Iraq to meet with the senior leadership and the troops deployed there.

70 percent Shiite and 15 percent Kurd, would stick in battle as long as they were provided adequate leadership. General Casey designated nine cities as pivotal and established satisfactory control in seven. Baghdad and Ramadi remained in crisis at the end of 2005.

9 The challenges in 2006. The main threat in the Sunni areas became not the disaffected Baathists, but instead the Al-Qaeda jihadists. Fallujah was the turning point; thereafter the Baathist leaders, many operating from Syria, lost control of the field generalship of the insurgency. Baathists bankrolled the insurgency, while impoverished Sunni youths—dedicated to throwing out the American infidel occupiers and apostate Shiite soldiers—supplied ample manpower. Baathist insurgent leaders clung to the belief that they could manipulate the jihadists and, when the time was right, throw them aside.

But they were mistaken. Their time had passed. The backbone of the insurgency was the Al-Qaeda jihadists. Some were foreigners and some Iraqis. What the jihadists had in common was their determination to rule Taliban-style in accord with the primal dictates of extreme fundamentalism, imagining the reemergence of a 10th-century caliphate. To argue that Iraq constituted a diversion from the war on terror was a reasonable position to hold two years ago. But wars change course and leaders. Sheik Abdullah al-Janabi and other Iraqi fundamentalists gradually came to the fore as the field generals of the insurgency.

By 2006, the jihadists had increased their campaign of terror bombing against Shiite civilians, and the Shiite militias had responded by dispatching death squads to kill Sunnis. Baghdad erupted in sectarian strife, illustrating that the police were untrustworthy. Casey then moved to place police training under his command. While a necessary step, training alone was not the answer. Too many police were corrupt and controlled by Shiite militias, and senior Iraqi leaders were doing little to punish disloyalty.

The Iraqi Army had emerged as loyal to the central government. The soldiers, or jundi, were relatively reliable as long as they were moderately well-led. The American attention had shifted from improving the individual battalions to ensuring that the institutional links from battalion to Baghdad functioned.

10 Battlefield trends to watch. The insurgents have demonstrated more effective small-unit leadership than have the Iraqi government forces, perhaps because the Sunnis are accustomed to dominating the Shiites. That advantage, however, can gradually be offset by superiority in numbers and resources.

The insurgents do not have a reliable sanctuary. Syria is the conduit for the passage of suicide bombers. But it is a sanctuary only for those Baathists who can afford bribes. Syria will not risk the confrontation that would ensue should it harbor large numbers of insurgents.

Inside Iraq, the insurgency relies upon civilian vehicles. As entry points to cities are controlled, the movement of the insurgents is restricted. The rank-and-file insurgents must rely on their tribes not to betray them in their home villages and cities.

Therein lies the heart of the matter. The insurgency's roots lie below the level of the military effort. The Iraqi Army provides a security umbrella only as long as squad-sized patrols are present in an area. In Sunni cities, the insurgents can mingle with the people and walk by army patrols with impunity, safe as long as they are not betrayed. In these parallel universes, the insurgents can coexist with the Iraqi military for years.

It is supposed to be the duty of the police, not the army, to provide order and to apprehend the insurgents in the markets. But any policeman who makes an arrest risks assassination. The policeman who is recruited locally in a Sunni city survives on the streets by accommodation. Only the military can stand up to the intimidation that has paralyzed the police in cities such as Fallujah. The police, however, fall under the Iraqi minister of interior, while the army is under the minister of defense. The army has partnered with American units; the police are languishing.

On a balance sheet, the insurgents enjoy the support of the Sunni population and control the pace of the engagements. There are few firefights, and almost no one is apprehended emplacing an improvised explosive device (IED). The campaign of IEDs and murderous bombings of civilians will continue until the perpetrators are betrayed by the dozens of neighbors who know who they are.

The Council on Foreign Relations recently published a piece about Iraq that accused the American military of not adapting. That was true in 2003 and midway through 2004. But no reasonable person can walk the Iraqi streets with American Soldiers today and argue that the U.S. military is hidebound. The American military today is not trying to subdue the insurgency by force of arms. Iraq is being handed over to the Iraqis. And in a bemused but real sense, the Americans have become the ombudsman for the Sunnis. In his direct way, Colonel Larry Nicholson, commanding a Marine regiment, said it best when addressing the Fallujah city council in May 2006. "Sooner or later, the American military is leaving," he said. "Work with us now to insure your own security and living conditions. Or risk returning to 2004, when al-Zarqawi and imams with whips took over your city."

At this stage, no one can predict how Iraq will turn out. American leadership is not the determining factor. The three critical tasks demand Iraqi rather than American leadership. First, the government in Baghdad must drive a wedge between Shiite extremists and the Shiite militias, and similarly split Al-Qaeda and the religious extremists from the Sunni "mainstream" insurgents. Second, the ministries in Baghdad must support their police and army forces in the field. As matters stand, American advisers and commanders time and again have to apply pressure before Baghdad responds. At all levels in the Iraqi system, there is an instinct to hoard—and too often to steal and skim—that deprives the fighting units of basic commodities. Third, the police must be reformed. How Sunni police can be effective and

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U.S. Army SPC Jeremy Wiklund provides security as SGT Allen Ronnei cuts the lock of the entrance gate of a home during a cordon and search mission in Baghdad, Iraq, 16 August 2006. The Soldiers are with 1st Battalion, 17th Infantry Regiment, 172d Stryker Brigade Combat Team.

not be assassinated in their own cities has yet to be shown. Conversely, the Shiite police in Baghdad have lost all trust among the Sunnis.

On the positive side of the ledger, three major hurdles were cleared during the past 12 months. First, elections were held and a government was chosen. Second, an Iraqi Army at the battalion fighting level emerged. Third, Iraq weathered the sectarian strife in February without a political collapse.

With a bisectarian government in Baghdad, the mainstream Sunni rejectionists have lost their rationale. In private conversations, Iraqi officials are asking the insurgents, why are you fighting when your own politicians are in the legislature and a Sunni is in charge of the army? The insurgent leaders, however, avoid risk in battle by paying impoverished youths $40 to emplace IEDs. Although it spent over $300 billion in Iraq, America never created a jobs program to compete with $40 IEDs. If captured, those leaders face a porous and corrupt judicial system that too frequently sets them free. Before they stop, they will ask what reward they will receive and how they can remain alive to enjoy it. In addition, the insurgency enjoys the support of hundreds of Sunni imams who preach sedition, knowing the judicial system will do nothing.

Three cities are the bellwethers in Iraq and bear watching over the next six months:

- In Baghdad, the police do not deserve credibility. Watch Baghdad to see if the Maliki government has the courage to declare de facto martial law and place everyone carrying a weapon on the street under the command of an Iraqi Army that does have credibility.
- In Ramadi, Al-Qaeda must be destroyed as an antecedent to any local settlement. Watch Ramadi to see if the Iraqi Army and police will fight together.
- In Fallujah, Al-Qaeda does not control the local insurgents. Watch Fallujah to see if a political settlement can be reached between a predominantly Shiite national government and the Sunni local insurgent leaders. By American standards, the violence in that city is horrific. But the mayor, the city council, the police—and the local insurgents—are bargaining politically with Baghdad about their future.

If you compare the city with its own past, diplomat Kael Weston said, "Today Fallujah is a cauldron of politics, not military battle." Weston, with 2 years' experience on the front lines, had won the respect of the Marines. He was saying roughly what Casey, the Multi-National Force commander, told me. "Iraq is a political-military problem," Casey said, "with the political component written in big block letters. It's not about us; it's about the Iraqis who have to work it out."

11 A drumbeat of negative tone has unintended long-term effects. While there is no unity of military judgment about the civilian management of the war, the Bush administration has been injudicious in its consultations with the military. The trust senior officers repose in senior civilian officials has eroded. Inside the senior levels of the military and among those who follow foreign policy, anger is directed at elected and appointed civilian officials seen as too blithe in initiating the war and too obtuse in leading once the going got tough.

The Iraqi war is being played out against a backdrop of bitter partisan politics in the United States. Of those on the front lines, 70 percent get out after four years of service, with no long-term benefits. All they want is praise for their valor and service. They want to be able to say, "I served at Fallujah, Najaf, or Mosul"—and be respected for their dedication.

Their valor is absent from this war because it is not reported. In Fallujah, for instance, 100 Marine squads engaged in 200 firefights *inside cement rooms,* using rifles, pistols, grenades, and knives. By any historical comparison, this was extraordinary. In Hue, Vietnam, in 1968, there was one fight inside a house. In the entire history of the SWAT teams in the United States, there have not been 200 fights with automatic weapons inside rooms. Yet the courage of our Soldiers and Marines in battles in Fallujah, Najaf, etc., received little press notice. Now we face the test of whether the press will place the tragedy of Haditha in perspective, or whether Haditha will unfairly become a false symbol.

More broadly, there has been a breakdown in our shared polity. Since World War II, no war has united our country; undeclared wars are fought for limited objectives and circumscribed causes. The next war is likely to be as politically divisive as this one. What happens if the youth of America adopt the same fractious attitudes as their political leaders? Who then will serve? In the tone of our criticisms while we are at war, we as a nation should be very careful that we do not undercut our own martial resolve. If we as a nation lose heart, who will fight for us? ***MR***