The Anatomy of the Long War's Failings

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May 2009

FootNotes

What we now sometimes refer to as the Long War began much earlier than the 9/11 attacks on America. But that day was seared into our collective national consciousness and animated our collective response. That sunny morning in Manhattan marked the second most violent day in U.S. history, exceeding Pearl Harbor and even D-Day in fatalities. Only Antietam's bloody wheat fields have witnessed more carnage in a single day. Since then, our country has mobilized for a global conflict against extremism with a multidimensional approach that has relied heavily on our military forces.

Just what have we accomplished to date in the Long War? Any ledger is going to identify some clear gains. Our campaign in Afghanistan quickly toppled the Taliban, and as a result al Qaeda no longer enjoys any sanctuary in Afghanistan. A major multinational invasion of Iraq led by the United States sliced though the remnants of the Iraqi Army and destroyed Saddam Hussein's regime. We have generated and exploited a degree of international cooperation and intelligence sharing—much of it very discrete—to foil several plots against ourselves or our partners. We have substantially reduced al Qaeda's infrastructure around the world, including its leadership, training facilities, and financial networks. And the nation has begun to shore up our home defenses. Notably, no similar attacks have occurred here at home.

But the ledger has both black and red ink. Bin Laden is alive and apparently well, although al Qaeda is a more diffuse organization. The core leadership of al Qaeda itself has probably been weakened, but its cause has been amplified and a generation of Muslims has been mobilized if not radicalized.

Afghanistan remains a key campaign in this war. Our initial campaign was brilliantly conceived by the CIA. An American force of CIA operatives and special forces aided no more than 15,000 Afghan troops to drive out some 50,000 Taliban and foreign fighters in late 2001.[1] But six years later, Afghanistan remains a troubled land. The Taliban, once vanquished, is resurging.

Like the early phases in Afghanistan, the early military operations in Iraq were also conducted in accord with the U.S. military's preferred style and exploited its overwhelming conventional military superiority. The early successes were ephemeral and temporary. The early occupation of Iraq went well for six months, but then turned sour as political enemies vied for national and local control. What Tom Ricks has called "perhaps the worst war plan in American history" failed to secure victory as defined by our political leaders. The planning shortfalls helped create the conditions for the difficult occupation that followed.[2] For two years, American commanders and diplomats looked for a way out, and tried to nurture along a weak government in Baghdad and shift the fight to the slowly

developing Iraqi Army.[3]

The cost for what has been accomplished to date is completely disproportionate to the limited gains. How did we get to this point?

Assessment Framework

In a highly regarded evaluation of modern military history entitled *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War* (1990), two noted historians, Eliot Cohen and John Gooch, defined a useful framework or taxonomy for analyzing military failures and their institutional origins. This taxonomy lays out three types or sources of organizational failure derived from a superb assessment of the institutional shortcomings that can lead to lost opportunities and operational defeat.

The first type of failure is the ability to properly *anticipate*. Anticipation is a crucial function of military services during peacetime as they attempt to discern key trends and the impact of new technologies on the conduct of war. It requires the ability to look past the last war, and anticipate where future threats could arise, and what the ever evolving character of conflict will be in that scenario. Strategic anticipation is abetted by understanding the enduring continuities of war, while ruthlessly looking for potential discontinuities and opportunities.

The second type or source of misfortune is the failure to *learn*. The U.S. Navy's failure to learn from Britain's experiences in World War I or during the Royal Navy's desperate efforts against the Nazi U-boats in 1940-41 is a notable example. The Navy was slow to implement convoys needed to conduct successful antisubmarine warfare. This resulted in relearning the hard way—in combat—a rather bloody education.

The final and perhaps most puzzling failure is the inability to *adapt*. "Where learning failures have their roots in the past," Cohen and Gooch stress, "adaptive failures suggest an inability to handle the changing present."[4] The U.S. Army Air Corps' insistence that daylight strategic bombing without fighter cover over Europe during World War II would materially contribute to the war effort, and its deadly persistence despite evidence to the contrary over Germany represents one notable example.[5]

The remainder of this paper will break down these three sources of misfortune and their relevance to the Long War in greater detail.

Failure to Anticipate

The failure to anticipate is perhaps the easiest to understand, as it usually relates to a failure in intelligence or some sort of strategic surprise. The failure to anticipate is often abetted by the use or imposition of false assumptions. These too can be explicit or implied. As one strategic analyst has noted, "Making assumptions can be a double edged sword, correct assumptions can minimize surprise and aid a desired outcome; errant assumptions can ensnare a nation and its armed forces in the unexpected. Sometimes assumptions, rather than physical inferiority, result in fiasco or defeat. The corridors of power are filled with consequential officials boasting of "slam dunk" certitude."[6]

The American failures in Iraq and the Long War come from such assumptions. They also come from a fundamental misreading in the evolving character of conflict, and an implicit net assessment that did not consider irregular adversaries worthy of study. In fact, rather than conduct serious net assessments, American planners generally worshipped at the altar of technology and imagined future conflicts as a mechanistic engineering exercise rather than a contest of wills with a determined adversary with a different culture and his own rule book.

For far too long American military planners and civilian policymakers have imagined future military capabilities through rose-colored glasses. The Bush administration embraced the Revolution in Military Affairs argument and promised to "skip a generation" in military modernization to exploit precision technology and information systems.[7]

Many if not most of these visions and concepts were not solving existing and evident military or security problems, but were simply advancing military revolutions devoid of political context or historical understanding. They were also often devoid of any opponent, reflecting a rather one-sided misconception about warfare.[8]

The technophiliacs in the Pentagon were abetted by a military culture that since Vietnam had retreated to a narrow view of its professional domain. Military culture is a prime factor in military effectiveness, adaptation, and innovation.[9] The Army didn't just ignore its Vietnam experience; it deliberately jettisoned the lessons learned and chose not to study it, or to determine what actually worked. Moreover, "it deliberately reconfigured itself physically as well as intellectually only to fight major war."[10]

The combination of civilian policymakers and a narrow military conception of its professional jurisdiction set the stage for serial failures in anticipation in the run-ups to both Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan in the fall of 2002 and Operation Iraqi Freedom in March 2003. These include failures to anticipate al Qaeda's resilience in battle and its ability to elude capture in Afghanistan; the extensive timelines and costs of reconstruction in Afghanistan and Iraq; the long-term implications of its military/kinetic approach against the broader Muslim community and well as potential allies; the effect of its poor strategic communications and public diplomacy resources; the decrepit nature of Iraq's infrastructure and its implications for post-conflict stability; the need to secure Iraq's critical infrastructure from damage or to secure its vast stocks of conventional military arms and munitions; the need for comprehensive guidance for the detention, control, and interrogation of large numbers of Iraqis; how improper interrogation techniques would undermine U.S. moral authority and undercut its standing internationally and its legitimacy in Iraq; and the implications of a de-Baathification policy or the impact of the dissolution of the Iraqi army.

Failure to Learn

Each of the above failures of anticipation were ultimately compounded by failures to learn. Even when one fails to anticipate problems, it is usually beneficial to recognize a problem when it arises and immediately seek out historical precedents to compress the learning curve. It is always better to use the experience of others, if only to minimize losses. History is our best source of professional experience, and as General Mattis of the Marines once noted, it provides a professional edge to those willing to invest the time. To simply improvise out of ignorance, "by filling body bags as we sort out what works" is an act of incompetence.[11] With thousands of years of historical knowledge before them, our military has no excuse not to have made better use of its storehouse of history.

These lessons were quite accessible to American policymakers and military planners. But the Army and Marines did not make this portion of the conflict spectrum a focus of effort. "It's not unfair to say," Dr. John Nagl has observed, "that in 2003 most Army officers knew more about the U.S. Civil War then they did about counterinsurgency."[12] Thus, in Iraq and Afghanistan, our forces relearned irregular war the hard way—in combat.

The basic tenets of counterinsurgency warfare can be captured by a set of principles or better yet by a collection of best practices. A number of Americans have produced sets based off of historical case studies and vetted by a variety of counterinsurgency experts.[13] These best practices include the following:

1. *Integrated Civil-Military mechanisms*. How all government agencies were coordinated, either under the command of a single individual or if "unity of effort" was gained by overall campaign plans and coordination committees.

2. *Governance/Political Reforms*. The degree to which government or political reforms were instituted to counter weaknesses or enhance credibility of the state.

3. *Socio-Economic Services*. The degree to which social development and economic projects were employed to better support the local civilian population.

4. *Integrated Intelligence*. The degree to which special intelligence organs were constructed or existing agencies integrated to deal with the insurgency.

5. *Special Units for Foreign Internal Defense*. The degree to which special units or local indigenous units were created as counters to the insurgents.

6. *Unique Military Training*. The degree to which the counterinsurgent forces are uniquely trained to deal with an incipient or full-blown insurgency.

7. *Information Operations*. How the counterinsurgency employed psychological operations to isolate the insurgents, to degrade their morale, to minimize their accomplishments or promote the government's themes.

8. *Population Control*. How the civilian population was isolated from the insurgents through security, identification cards, barriers or forced relocation and reestablishment into safer and cordoned centers.

9. *Resource Control*. This factor accounts for efforts to limit or isolate the insurgents from food, weapons or other forms of support.

10. *Discriminate Force*. The degree to which counterinsurgent forces limit the use of military power to the minimal degree necessary to avoid antagonizing the local population and to preclude collateral damage being exploited as propaganda.

The literature suggests a high correlation between all the best practices and operational success. When governments and their supporting allies and partners used these elements as key components of their overall campaign, they were generally successful. The same is true in Iraq. Regrettably, too many U.S. commanders were not familiar with these practices. Only a few officers understood this mode of conflict and this aspect of their profession. Population-centric and kinetically disciplined operations were successfully implemented by then Major General David Petraeus in Mosul in 2003 and in Tal Afar by the 3rd Armored Combat Regiment later in 2005.[14]

In almost all cases, some sort of learning curve was evident, and eventually policymakers and military leaders reassessed themselves and made numerous strategic or operational changes. Some adapted faster than others. Those who ignored history, continued to underestimate the opponent, and failed to learn from the experience of others fared much worse.

The failure to learn is quite understandable if you think of the U.S. military culture. For several decades, thanks in large part to lingering attitudes from the Vietnam War, irregular warfare has been an intellectual and strategic orphan in U.S. professional military institutions. The heavy cost of both wars is the price paid for ignoring known historical lessons and for a narrow military cultural prism that constrained U.S. strategic and operational planning and the intellectual readiness of our Officer Corps.

Failure to Adapt

The final factor in evaluating military failures involves operational adaptation. Adaptation is the ability "to handle the changing present" and the interactive nature of war. Strategic and operational adaptation is a key element in warfare, one often retarded by ideological policies or by military cultures that fail to recognize how critical assumptions in prewar planning have been proven to be false on the battlefield.

The velocity of organizational learning and adaptation is important in insurgencies. The U.S. military has made a number of adaptations in its approach to these conflicts, in how they prepare for them, and for how they train, education and organize their forces:

- The military has moved from ad hoc headquarters to robustly staffed structures to better coordinate the comprehensive activities they are managing with the Iraqis and with NATO.

- Military Transition Teams (MTTs) and Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) have been formed and employed in both Iraq and Afghanistan to assist in training indigenous personnel and to provide development and economic assistance at lower levels.

- There have been substantial changes to the training and educational base to better prepare U.S. service members for irregular warfare.

- The Services have stood up a variety of special cultural and language programs, and centers of excellence for the study of culture, for counterinsurgency, and for stability operations.

- The Army and Marines have adapted their forces to increase the skills sets that are of greater salience in these kinds of war (intelligence personnel, translators and interrogators, explosive ordnance personnel, and military policemen, civil affairs specialists and information or psychological operations experts). But both the Army and Marines have bureaucratically resisted innovative organizational structures dedicated to preventing or prevailing in irregular warfare.[15]

- Probably the most significant shift was the intellectual surge produced by the development and promulgation of an updated counterinsurgency doctrine.[16]

Adaptation, however, is not yet complete. While the Army and the Marine Corps have seen changes in their structures, and more substantively in their training systems, the Air Force is still mulling over what it should do. We still lack the non-military personnel and skill sets from the rest of the U.S. government, although steps are being taken to increase the size of the Foreign Service and establish a Civilian Response Force. The State Department has also stood up a cell to improve cross-agency crisis planning, but the ability of the National Security Council and the broader national security community to develop coherent strategic and operational plans for protracted complex contingencies remains a subject of numerous studies and recommendations.[17]

These are merely operational forms of adaptation. Many were obvious after 2004 but were only eventually implemented after trial and error. This compounded the failure to anticipate and learn.

The more substantial adaptation was the shift in strategy that was approved in late 2006 and executed in 2007 in Iraq. At some point, members of President Bush's NSC staff, energized by external criticisms and the media and the worst public opinion in U.S. presidential history, started looking for a new strategy. After the better part of a year of various reviews and external study groups, the administration finally settled on a shift in leadership in the Pentagon and in theater. It also crafted a change in priorities and operational focal points, shifting from training Iraqi forces to a population-centric approach that put "boots on the ground" in their neighborhoods. Ultimately, President Bush elected to endorse the strategy shift and the manpower resources to support it. This is often referred to now as the "surge strategy." This approach is founded on best practices and principles that should have been employed in 2004.[18] Thanks to the combined leadership of Generals David Petraeus and Ray Odierno and then Ambassador Ryan Crocker, the strategy was actually carried out. They made a critical situation more palatable in Iraq, and the turnaround they created will be studied for many decades to come.

Conclusion

In their multilevel taxonomy, Cohen and Gooch noted that the presence of two kinds of misfortune can produce what they called "aggregate failures." These are usually the result of anticipatory and learning failures. However, when all three kinds of failure simultaneously happen, it is usually catastrophic. Catastrophic failure is most often fatal to nations. Fortunately, a catastrophic failure in the Long War has been averted by the painfully slow adaptation of American strategy and implementing tactics. The sclerotic American strategy process reacted to several years of diminishing results and rising criticism. Key individuals with fortitude, intellectual capacity, and an eye for opportunity were placed in charge.

Continued adaptation in institutions, processes and human capital remain critical if the United States and its allies are to ultimately prevail. Yet, the issue is still in doubt. Whether adaptation and innovation will be locked in is being contested in the Pentagon, and only time will tell if Secretary Gates is successful in adapting long-held mindsets in the armed forces.[19]

History teaches us that rigorous study of the past, questioning received wisdom and reconsidering assumptions are the best security against catastrophic failure.

Notes

1. ^ For a review of Afghanistan, see Daniel Marston, "Lessons in 21st Century Counterinsurgency: Afghanistan 2001-2007," in Daniel Marston and Carter Malkasian, eds., *Counterinsurgency in Modern Warfare*, New York: Osprey, 2008; and David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* , New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

2. ^ Thomas Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* , New York: Penguin, 2006, p. 115.

3. ^ Carter Malkasian, "Counterinsurgency in Iraq: May 2003-January 2007," in Marston and Malkasian, eds., *Counterinsurgency in Modern Warfare*; and Kilcullen, *Accidental Guerrilla*, pp. 115-85.

4. ^ Cohen and Gooch, *Military Misfortunes*, p. 27.

5. ^ The best source is Williamson Murray's "Strategic Bombing: The British, American and German Experiences," pp. 96–142, in Murray and Millett, *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*.

6. ^ Patrick Cronin, pp. 2-3 in his introductory chapter in *The Impenetrable Fog of War: Reflections on Modern Warfare and Strategic Surprise*, Westport, CT: Praeger Security, 2008.

7. ^ See Williamson Murray, "Computer In, Clausewitz Out, Military Culture and Technological Hubris," *National Interest*, Summer 1997; H.R. McMaster, "The Human Element, When Gadgetry Becomes Strategy," *World Affairs*, Winter 2009.

8. ^ Frederick W. Kagan, *Finding the Target: The Transformation of American Military Policy*, New York: Encounter Books, 2006.

9. ^ On military culture and self-identity see Theo Farrell and Terry Terriff, eds., *The Sources of Military Change: Culture, Politics, Technology*, Boulder, CO: Rienner, 2002, pp. 268-70; and Williamson Murray, "Innovation, Past and Future," in Murray and Millett, *Innovation in the Interwar Period*, pp. 312-18.

10. ^ Strachan in Cronin, p. 81.

11. ^ James N. Mattis, "The Professional Edge," *Marine Corps Gazette*, Feb. 2004, pp. 19-20.

12. ^ Dr. John Nagl in the foreword to the Chicago University Press edition of the Counterinsurgency manual.

13. ^ Kalev I. Sepp, "Best Practices in Counterinsurgency," *Military Review*, May-June 2005, pp. 8-12.

14. ^ George Packer, "The Lessons of Tal Afar," *New Yorker*, April 10, 2006.

15. ^ Robert Martinage, *The Global War on Terror: An Assessment* , Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2007, p. 279.

16. ^ Headquarters, Department of the Army (Headquarters, Marine Corps), *Counterinsurgency*. Field Manual No. 3-24 (Marine Corps Warfighting Publication No. 3-33.5), December 2006.

17. ^ Clark A. Murdock and Michele A. Flournoy, *Beyond Goldwater Nichols: U.S. Government and Defense Reform for a New Strategic Era, Phase 2 Report*, Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 2005. For shortfalls in U.S. government initiatives, see Stephen D. Krasner and Carlos Pascual, "Addressing State Failure," *Foreign Affairs* , July/August 2005.

18. ^ Tom Ricks, *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006–2008* , New York: Penguin Press, 2009.

19. ^ See David Ucko, "Innovation or Inertia: The U.S. Military and the Learning of Counterinsurgency," Orbis, Spring 2008.