

The US Military After Iraq

A Speculation

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What follows is not the product of intensive research or long periods of study. Rather, it is, as the title suggests, a *speculation* – based on my firsthand knowledge of the US military and many of its senior officers, and time (not a lot, but some) spent in Iraq – on a critical question: what will the US military, particularly the Army and the Marine Corps, be like after the insurgency in Iraq has run its course?

In examining this question, I do not address two issues which attract considerable interest in media and foreign capitals: the materiel or financial consequences of the war, and its specific implications for the US military – i.e., is the war going to break it? Neither, in my judgement, is especially relevant. Compared to all other countries' defence budgets, America's is staggering and, as such, is able to absorb myriad problems and shortfalls. And militaries, by and large, do not 'break' unless they suffer catastrophic defeat. That is not going to happen in Iraq. To be sure, there are signs of severe strain in the US military – divorce rates are up (though they have stabilized in the past year); recruitment and the quality of intake is down, if only slightly; and cases of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) may be on the increase. Too many officers are being promoted at, say, the level of major or lieutenant colonel, too many soldiers with below average intelligence scores are being recruited.

Nevertheless, on a number of levels the indicators suggest a much more positive picture. One only has to recall Vietnam and the impressions given by soldiers – in the field and returned home – of that war. The stories of drug problems, depression, internal violence, an army fraying – you don't get that

with veterans of the conflict in Iraq. The personal weblogs – fascinating windows on today's military world – reveal typical soldierly attitudes towards all manner of things, but not the sense of real decay and pointlessness that came to define soldiers' attitudes toward Vietnam. And lastly, for what it's worth, the reports I have received from my military friends in Iraq tend to be tepidly optimistic. No one is pretending that it will not be a long, hard slog. But the Iraqi military is improving, the US is doing a lot more counter-insurgency with them, and certain sectors of the country are becoming less violent – real signs of progress.

Iraq, Vietnam and Transformation

What particularly interests me is how the war will affect the temperament of the military. Will its understanding of the military profession be changed by the experience of Iraq? Large wars put an imprint on entire generations of officers. The US military was shaped by a generation from the Civil War, and so, too, the following century by officers who served in the Second World War. It was shaped yet again by Vietnam. I believe Iraq – with (to date) more than 2,000 Americans killed, 15,000 wounded and as many as a million soldiers having passed through the country – will define another generation of officers. Here the recent article in *Military Review* by Brigadier Nigel Aylwin-Foster, a senior British Army officer who was deputy commander of a programme to train the Iraqi military, is instructive. The article was, at least in part, a scathing indictment of not only the US Army but American military culture as a whole. There were suggestions of 'institutional

racism', 'cultural insensitivity', 'a predisposition to offensive operations', 'a stiflingly hierarchical outlook'. Some of Aylwin-Foster's key charges were probably valid; others might be put down to Anglo-American tensions, or the particular period of his service in Iraq, or merely the differences between British and American military cultures. What seems abundantly clear is that in Iraq he encountered an American army shaped by the late Cold War, by its own reaction to Vietnam, and its overriding mission of preparing for large-scale combat in Europe. In this it was superbly proficient. But despite extensive formal military education, it had very little combat experience. By this time the Vietnam generation was washing out, and for the US Army the 1991 Gulf War – four days of combat against an enemy that was already largely on the run – was perhaps too brief to imprint itself on the current generation.

I believe Iraq will define another generation of officers

The same is not true of the insurgency in Iraq. Today's US Army is a battle-hardened force. The 'combat patch', worn by soldiers to signify the unit they first went into combat with, is now virtually ubiquitous in the US Army. And they all know someone who has been shot at or blown up. They have experienced loss. Like their predecessors in Vietnam, they are unwilling to openly criticize their own institution and commanders, and the army that went into Iraq. As after Vietnam, there has been plenty of criticism directed at the offices of the Secretary of Defense, the State Department and so forth. But also as after Vietnam, there is an awareness of real failure by the institutions, and a resolution to deal with that failure.

Another comparison to be drawn with Vietnam is the Army's attitude towards 'irregular warfare', also known as counter-insurgency and a host of other terms. In the wake of Vietnam, the view of senior officers was 'we don't do irregular warfare, it's not part of our

repertoire'. And the same goes for peacekeeping. Neither was part of their understanding, or paradigm, of 'war'. I believe that has changed. Even soldiers from the traditional heavy army, such as the 1st Cavalry Division at Fort Hood, with their acres of tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles, do not think of Iraq as anomalous. The sense now is that their tasks in Iraq will be the 'bread and butter' of future US military activity.

This leads me to the current buzzword in US and European military circles: transformation. I have never quite understood the concept (transforming from what to what?). What developments gave rise to the vague rhetoric of transformation is not especially important because it has, in my view, already been replaced by something very different, a much more focused approach to new military tasks. This approach to irregular warfare will be conditioned by experience and also technology. Whilst this will affect the Army and Marine Corps principally, other changes will bear more heavily on the Navy and Air Force, prominent among them will be the US-Chinese strategic relationship and halting the spread of WMD. The concept of pre-emption will, in turn, need to be considered much more seriously than it has been.

Civil-Military Relations

Equally significant as the changes in the US warfighting paradigm are developments in the country's civil-military relations. American society has completed a process of reconciliation with its armed forces, mending the wounds that arose out of Vietnam. In the early 1990s, in the aftermath of the first Gulf War, the rapturous welcome given to returning soldiers partly reflected the deep sense of guilt Americans felt about the treatment of Vietnam veterans. As for soldiers, there were still lingering suspicions about being left in the lurch, that ordinary Americans did not understand or appreciate what they did. A number of developments have eroded these perceptions over time, but perhaps none more significantly than Iraq. The US military has taken serious casualties in an ambiguous cause for nearly three

years, yet the support of American society for its military – however divisive the occupation has become at home – has been quite remarkable. This support is evident everywhere: at US airports, in restaurants, in the countless 'care packages' soldiers receive in the field, sent by people they have never met.

Support for the US military is resilient, but how representative is it of American society? Ethnically it is, contrary to foreign perceptions, fairly representative; socio-economically it is not. Officers who have attended elite universities are rare. After 2001 the current Administration could have changed that, but they failed to do so. That was a mistake, though a lot of the blame has to be placed on the doorstep of the military itself, and its resistance to an aggressive change in its recruiting strategy. Increasingly, this military draws new recruits from military families, where sons and daughters follow their fathers and their father's father into the Services, as is common in Britain. There is no similar tradition in the United States, so it will be interesting to observe what long-term impact it might have on the military.

The relationship with the press is another area of civil-military affairs in which we are witnessing important changes. Within the military there remains – and always will remain – grumbling about individual journalists and the profession as a whole. On balance, however, the rancour and suspicion that blighted the relationship in the past is gone. The military has, broadly speaking, received fairly positive coverage; and it is a lot more sophisticated in its thinking about journalists – their role, their motivations, the differences between good ones and bad ones, who you can and cannot trust. Perhaps the greatest tension today lies not between the military and the press, but between the military and other institutions of government. Resentment is still high over the role of the State Department, the FBI and other agencies that failed to contribute significantly where and when they were needed once the major combat phase was over. The military is now far more attuned, and accepting, of the need for various kinds of involvement from government institutions and a much

stronger inter-agency approach to irregular warfare scenarios.

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My last point on civil-military affairs centres on relations at the top, namely the relationship between the executive and senior commanders. In the 1990s a number of senior officers made no secret of their dislike for President Clinton. Indeed, some ought to have been court martialed, under Article 88 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, for their publicly expressed contempt for the Commander-in-Chief. The fact that they were not – seen by many as evidence of his Administration's lack of backbone – only reinforced disdain for Clinton in the military. Much was expected of a Republican Administration, but when Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld demonstrated a brusque way with the uniformed military, and not much inclination to yield to their

institutional preferences, a reaction set in. On the whole, this is a good thing: I would rather have a military that is slightly wary – not paranoid or fearful, but wary – of civilian politicians because it is all the more likely that they will be self-consciously apolitical. I would prefer not to see retired officers endorsing presidential candidates, as we have seen recently. More worrying still is the growing tendency of politicians to hide behind the military. It is not acceptable for any Secretary of Defense or President to duck criticism by saying that he/she is merely following the advice of military advisers or commanders in the field. That is a particularly insidious kind of obfuscation.

Conclusion

Iraq is going to leave an imprint – profound and lasting – on the current generation of young officers, who in time will be taking over the Army and the other Services. Iraq is also going to force the military to rethink its educational system; indeed, this is already happening. There is broad awareness that it did not do an adequate job of preparing the US military to fight this kind of war. The institutions of professional military education are not in good shape, and I am not convinced that they will get

much better. On the other hand, there are a number of serious efforts underway to develop coherent military thought and doctrine to meet the challenge of irregular warfare, conducted by military people with firsthand experience. The Army is completely rewriting its counter-insurgency manual, and doing so along quite sensible lines. Moreover, there has been a real impetus to provide officers with solid post-graduate education. This was common during the early Cold War period, but in recent years the numbers of officers receiving post-graduate degrees has dropped sharply. Over the next year or two, with the introduction of new programmes, which among other incentives enables officers to take non-scientific degrees, including the social sciences and humanities, the numbers will jump dramatically. A remark by one of the most successful commanders in Iraq, David Petraeus, commander of 101st Airborne Division, reinforces my own view that this initiative will bear fruit. He told me recently that the most important training he received for dealing with what they encountered in the Mosel area of northern Iraq was not, as one might readily assume, his experience in Bosnia. Rather, it was having done a PhD at the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton.

Besides the renewed emphasis on education, there is one final point that suggests that the US military is moving in the right direction and is beginning to grapple with the myriad complexities and challenges irregular warfare presents. And it brings us back to Brigadier Aylwin-Foster's article. No one in the US military could have read it without feeling uneasy. However tactful, his message was blunt, and the verdict – on major aspects of US military culture – damning. Yet it was published in the *flagship publication* of the *United States Army's* command and staff college. It received the support of the head of the Army Training and Doctrine Command, who had been a general officer in Iraq. Indeed, a copy of the article will reach every general officer in the US Army. It is this new kind of openness, and a capacity to accept criticism and learn from others, that encourages me to believe that the United States is building a better and more thoughtful military for the future. ■

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