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William R. Hawkins

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Iraq: Heavy Forces and Decisive Warfare

WILLIAM R. HAWKINS

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The Iraq War was a stunning example of the new paradigm of “decisive warfare,” even more so than had been the Afghanistan campaign. The Bush Administration came into office defining this new paradigm as the ability to march on an enemy’s capital and overthrow its regime.¹ The thinking behind this paradigm is often linked to the failure of the United States to march on Baghdad in 1991, but there is also a link back to the indecisive “limited war” doctrine which led to failure in Vietnam. In Southeast Asia only Hanoi waged decisive warfare by sending an army south to capture Saigon and impose a regime change that ended the war. US attempts to bomb North Vietnam to a negotiated settlement did not result in victory. Regimes that cannot be persuaded to change their behavior must themselves be changed, or else conflicts will drag on, and America is at a political and diplomatic disadvantage in wars of attrition.

While other recent wars are remembered for gun-camera footage of missiles flying through windows, the most memorable images of Operation Iraqi Freedom are of American armored columns roaring along highways, and of icons of Saddam Hussein being dragged through the dust. While a lucky bomb hit might have decapitated the regime, a ground offensive to seize the center of government and break its hold on the country was the essential factor defining victory.

The war showed the ability of fast-moving, heavily armed troops to disrupt defenses before they could be established. Technology played its part in a permissive environment provided by American air supremacy. A profusion of aerial platforms detected enemy forces in the open, attacked them in a variety of settings, and provided close support with precision weapons. Air transports and helicopters provided reinforcement and resupply for friendly ground forces. Improved com-

munications and surveillance systems allowed Army brigade groups and Marine regimental combat teams to operate independently like small divisions. These combined-arms units performed in accord with many of the theories put forth about transformation by Army Chief of Staff General Eric Shinseki.²

The rapid advance centered on Baghdad was the real “shock and awe” part of the campaign as it ensured that the regime was doomed. Iraqi Republican Guard units that were initially deployed outside Baghdad to block approach routes were so rapidly engaged by interdiction and maneuver that they could not pull back into the city and mount the kind of urban warfare coalition planners had been concerned about.

This “speed kills” doctrine is not really new, however. It predates even the theories of blitzkrieg with which the US campaign has been compared. Two centuries ago, Napoleon argued that to wage war “energetically and with severity” is the only way to “make it shorter.” But it takes exceptional troops and a brilliant operational plan to actually pull it off in any era.

Napoleon also argued that God fights on the side with the heaviest artillery. The heavy, combined-arms units of the Army and Marines executed rapid maneuver with brilliance, and their firepower and protection enabled them to overcome whatever resistance or counterattacks they encountered. It was reported that Iraqi irregulars resorted to trucks armed with machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades because that had worked in Somalia. But one of the central controversies about Somalia was the lack of armor deployed with US forces. Against the “thunder runs” of US tanks and infantry fighting vehicles, such tactics were suicidal.

If enemy light troops proved ineffective against American heavy units, US light troops were also not used as spearheads. The heavy components, the 3d Infantry Division, 1st Marine Expeditionary Force, and British 7th Armoured Brigade, were given the toughest assignments where resistance was most likely. Lighter units from the 101st and 82d Airborne divisions were kept to the west, where opposition was much lighter.

The 173d Airborne Brigade, though composed of crack troops with air support, had a rougher go of it in the north because it lacked integral armor and adequate artillery. The offensive there finally got moving after M1 Abrams tanks and M2 Bradley fighting vehicles from the 1st Infantry Division were flown into captured airfields to reinforce the paratroopers two weeks after they had made their dramatic airdrop.³ Turkish opposition had blocked the deployment of the heavy 4th Infantry Division on the northern front.

William R. Hawkins is Senior Fellow for National Security Studies at the US Business and Industry Council in Washington, D.C. He previously spent five years on the staff of US Representative Duncan Hunter. Before coming to Washington, he taught economics at Radford University and Appalachian State University.

Looking to the Future

Part of defense transformation has been the recognized need to increase the firepower of light forces. The Army is fielding new brigades built around the Stryker wheeled armored infantry fighting vehicle. This 19-ton vehicle will come in a variety of configurations including those armed with anti-tank missiles, heavy mortars, and 105mm guns, as well as engineering, medical, and reconnaissance variants. The Army hopes to field six Stryker Brigade Combat Teams, each with more than 300 Strykers, by converting light infantry and cavalry brigades currently in the force. After the 101st Airborne Division had seized airfields in western Iraq, Stryker brigades could have been flown in to reinforce the airborne infantry, giving them both increased combat power and mobility. But the first Stryker brigade will not be ready for deployment until near the end of 2003.

The issue then will be how much airlift will be available to move how many of the Stryker brigades. While size and weight are critical factors in air-landing operations, there is not much practical difference between moving a Stryker brigade and a traditional mechanized brigade by sea. The differences between a Stryker and an M1 or M2 within the context of the total load of a combat brigade being moved by a convoy of ships will not affect how soon the convoy will reach its destination. The main difference will be in what capabilities the brigade will bring to the fight once unloaded, and it is the mission that should determine what capabilities are needed.

Few question the need to up-gun light units with air-transportable armored systems that can get American ground troops into action quickly, but without putting them at too great a disadvantage against enemy forces that will probably contain heavy units of tanks and artillery. The debate is whether the Army should become a predominantly light force and scrap many of its own tanks and artillery. Here is where those planning to base the Objective Force on more lightly armed and armored units need to take a second look at their simulations and wargames compared to the actual experience of war in Iraq.

It is open to question whether the proposed diminutive Future Combat System (FCS) could conduct the same high-paced Iraq-style campaign in the face of a well-armed enemy with a will to resist. The FCS will be a group of manned and unmanned ground and airborne weapon systems weighing 20 tons or less. The size and weight limit for the high-tech, futuristic FCS was set so that they can be deployed via C-130 transport planes, the first of which flew nearly 50 years ago. The Objective Force is set for fielding in 2010, with the first prototype unit equipped by 2008.⁴

The FCS is too often portrayed, even by proponents, as skulking around or hiding while it waits for airpower to destroy through attrition any opposing forces before it dares advance. For example, a video presented by Boeing (the prime FCS contractor) at the 23d Army Science Conference demonstrated how the FCS might perform in combat. In the simulation, robotic sensors spot three

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enemy vehicles and immediately send the information via satellite to a naval vessel that launches missiles which destroy two of the targets. The remaining enemy vehicle is then knocked out by an Air Force fighter-bomber. Only with these enemy threats eliminated could the FCS “cells” (of three vehicles each) move forward.⁵ It is thus difficult to envision the lightly armed and armored FCS making “thunder runs” through enemy defenses.

There is a major conceptual flaw in this depiction of future war common to much of the romance associated with precision strike technology. What is presented is an ultimate form of attrition warfare. Every enemy unit encountered is apparently to be destroyed by some exotic means before American units are to venture forth to carry out any type of maneuver. Indeed, there seems to be little envisioned need to maneuver on the battlefield, only hide until the smoke clears and then advance across the craters left by the bombs and missiles. This attitude is more reminiscent of the World War I notion that “the artillery conquers, the infantry occupies” rather than of the blitzkrieg operations that broke the defensive stalemate of modern warfare.⁶

Airpower and precision strike—along with tube and rocket artillery—are vital parts of the larger ground battle of annihilation, not a substitute for it. Airpower is needed to help protect the flanks of rapidly advancing armored and mechanized units, and for providing on-call fire support for their lead elements. Indeed, the tactical mobility of airpower across the battlefield gives it the kind of flexibility that makes it the ideal joint partner with mechanized ground forces in maneuver warfare. The number of kills racked up by the bombers is less important than their shock effect in disrupting enemy deployments and slowing enemy reactions so that friendly ground units can pin, envelop, and rout opposing forces.

One of the constants in military history from ancient times to the present is that the real destruction of an army occurs when it is forced to retreat. As Napoleon said of retreats, “the loss of life is often greater than in two battles.” And when the enemy is surrounded by rapid maneuver as well as subject to vigorous pursuit, he can be annihilated as a fighting force. The majority of his soldiers will end up as prisoners or deserters rather than casualties, and the bulk of his weapons and equipment will be abandoned rather than engaged in any shootout. The great encirclement battles on the Eastern Front in World War II are the ulti-

mate examples of this approach, as was General Douglas MacArthur's landing at Inchon in Korea and Israel's counterattack across the Suez in 1973. The drive on Baghdad can now be added to the list, as the bulk of the Iraqi army was bypassed and subsequently disintegrated.

As retired Major General Robert H. Scales, Jr., has argued, "Rarely has superior firepower determined the outcome of a war. Armies and nations have displayed remarkable resiliency in sustaining enduring punishment wrought by bombs, artillery and missiles. . . . But maneuver by itself has inherent limitations. Depending on the experience of soldiers and their leaders, the unexpected presence of enemy forces in their rear or on their flanks, while disconcerting, rarely leads to total collapse."⁷ Maneuver forces must be agile enough to exploit enemy weak points, powerful enough to seize vital political or strategic objectives, and robust enough to hold until follow-on forces can arrive to secure the victory. Decisive warfare confirms the requirement that ground forces at the tip of the spear combine speed, firepower, and endurance.

According to the Army White Paper *Concepts for the Objective Force*, the future Objective Force is supposed to be able to maneuver "from strategic distances . . . arriving at multiple points of entry, improved and unimproved," which are attributes of light forces. But its real mission is to "overwhelm aggressor anti-access capabilities, and rapidly impose our will on our opponents."⁸ That will require heavy weapons. Too much emphasis on the desire for rapid deployment may compromise the ability to actually accomplish the mission of winning the war, especially a decisive war calling for the complete defeat and conquest of the enemy's country. Using light forces as the arm of decision is a trade-off of capabilities, not a "trade-on" that combines them. Transformation should concentrate more on improving the means of deploying robust combat units to the theater of conflict and the battlefield than has been the case, studying the proper expansion of fast cargo ships, prepositioned equipment, and heavy lift aircraft to get the job done.

Keeping Our Heavy Advantage

In an interview in *Defense News* the day Tikrit fell, Joint Chiefs Chairman General Richard Myers was asked if the tank will survive transformation. After paying his respects to the FCS, Myers replied, "Never was it said that things like the M1 [Abrams] tanks and M2 Bradley Fighting Vehicles are not required. That's never been part of the discussion."⁹ But in many circles, the replacement of the M1 and M2 by the FCS has been a major part of the discussion. Indeed, the FCS is commonly referred to "as the core building block" of the Objective Force. The latest example of this shift in force structure is in the Army's 2004 budget, which did not include money to upgrade the M1s and M2s of the 3d Infantry Division and the 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment so as not to take money away from the FCS program.

It should be remembered that the initial concept of a lighter Army was a product of the 1990s when the focus was more on peacekeeping. Such missions

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assumed operations more in line with police actions than sustained conventional combat (which was one of the reasons armor was not sent to Somalia). The 21st century, however, has started with a bang. The engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan have been fundamentally different from those in Bosnia and Haiti. Major war is back, and due to the greater importance of large-scale conflict to the regional and global balance of power, the Army must be prepared to fight at the high end of the spectrum.

The dominant argument for creating a lighter Army has been the need for rapid strategic deployment in response to sudden crises. But the Iraq War demonstrated that it is diplomacy that sets the timetable, not troop movements. President Bush first identified Iraq as part of the “axis of evil” in his State of the Union address on 29 January 2002. Baghdad’s rejection of UN weapons inspections proposals on 5 July 2002 set in motion the events leading to the invasion of Iraq. On 8 November 2002 the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1441 establishing a new inspection regime, which Iraq accepted five days later. Four more months of inspections, propaganda, and coalition-building followed before the United States gave up its attempt to obtain a second UN resolution condemning Iraq on 14 March and issued its own ultimatum to Saddam Hussein to leave Iraq on 16 March. Operation Iraqi Freedom finally commenced on 19 March 2003.

The building of coalitions, the attempt to coerce a favorable outcome without war, and the desire to conform to international norms combine to make the much-discussed “bolt from the blue” a rare occurrence. The most telling example of the superior speed of military deployment compared to diplomatic preparation was the arrival of a fleet of ships carrying the heavy equipment of the 4th Infantry Division off the coast of Turkey well before the process of obtaining Ankara’s permission to unload had reached its disappointing climax.

Both Gulf Wars have shown a two-step process involving military and diplomatic maneuvers. In the early stages, American air-transportable troops, prepositioned equipment, and Marine amphibious units are rapidly deployed to put down political markers. This first wave is not strong enough to fight a decisive campaign, but it does show national resolve and puts muscle behind diplomacy. As the situation deteriorates, diplomacy shifts to building military coalitions and securing local bases for a further deployment of the heavy units

needed to fight and win a war. Because America's superior strength is known to its adversaries, Washington is able to maintain the initiative and thus control the time when large-scale military action will commence—which ought not to be until it has the forces deployed to prevail.

The diplomatic environment can also affect operational choices. Operation Desert Storm saw 34 days of air strikes as part of an attrition campaign against Iraqi defenses prior to the US ground offensive in 1991. The United States could not afford a similar wait to launch the decisive stage of the campaign to topple Saddam in 2003. A month of air strikes might have triggered a worldwide political outcry, with demands for renewed negotiations, a cease-fire, and no regime change. American and coalition forces had to advance on Iraq's capital from the first day and move as quickly as possible to achieve their political objective. This will have to be the model for future campaigns.

Fortunately, the Iraqis fought for Saddam the way the Italians fought for Mussolini in 1943 rather than how the Germans fought for Hitler in 1945 (it cost the Russians 250,000 casualties to take Berlin, a city smaller than Baghdad). American intelligence analysts, covert operatives, and psychological warfare specialists deserve much credit for understanding and exploiting the enemy's fragile political environment. However, Washington cannot always count on the enemy being so irresolute. In addition to World War II, the Korean and Vietnam wars provide vivid examples of enemy armies that are willing to fight tenaciously for totalitarian regimes. The next adversary may use chemical weapons or pull its main forces into urban areas to fight to the bitter end. To overcome such enemies requires not only sound strategy and dynamic leadership, but the heavy weapons to prevail in the force-on-force battles that will determine the future of entire nations.

NOTES

1. "If deterrence fails, decisively defeat an adversary. . . . Such a decisive defeat could include changing the regime of an adversary state or occupation of a foreign territory until US strategic objectives are met." Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington: Department of Defense, 30 September 2001), p. 13. See also US Department of Defense, "Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz Briefing on the Defense Planning Guidance," 16 August 2001, http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Aug2001/t08162001_t0816dsd.html, in which Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz says, "We want to have a major war capability to impose whatever terms—'win decisively,' I guess is the terminology. It was called 'unconditional surrender' in World War II."

2. See, for example, Douglas A. MacGregor, *Breaking the Phalanx* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997).

3. "As Turkey Casts Wary Eye on Kurdish-held Territory," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 10 April 2003, p. A8.

4. Frank Tiboni, "U.S. Army's Future Tank Features New Look," *Defense News*, 9 June 2003, p. 40. Additional information about the FCS is available at <http://www.darpa.mil/fcs/index.html>.

5. Frank Tiboni, "Simulation Shows Speed, IT Key to U.S. FCS," *Defense News*, 9-15 December 2002, p. 8.

6. See Jonathan M. House, *Combined Arms Warfare in the Twentieth Century* (Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2001), in particular pp. 32-36.

7. Robert H. Scales, Jr., "A Sword with Two Edges: Maneuver in 21st Century Warfare," in *Future Warfare Anthology* (rev. ed.; Carlisle, Pa.: US Army War College, 2000), pp. 72-73.

8. US Army White Paper, *Concepts for the Objective Force*, undated, <http://www.objectiveforce.army.mil/pages/ObjectiveForceWhitePaper.pdf>.

9. Interview with General Richard Myers, *Defense News*, 14-20 April 2003, p. 46.